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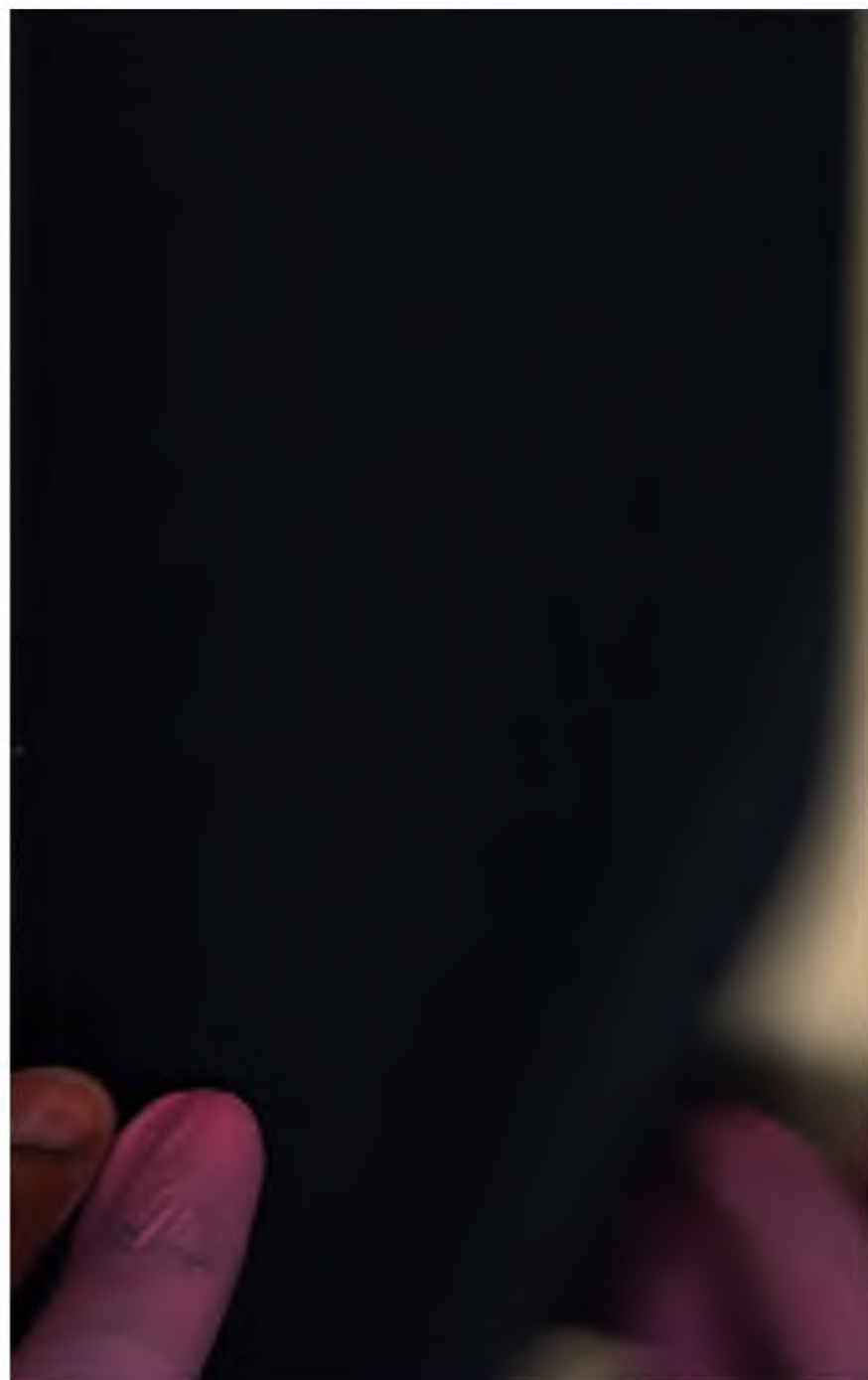
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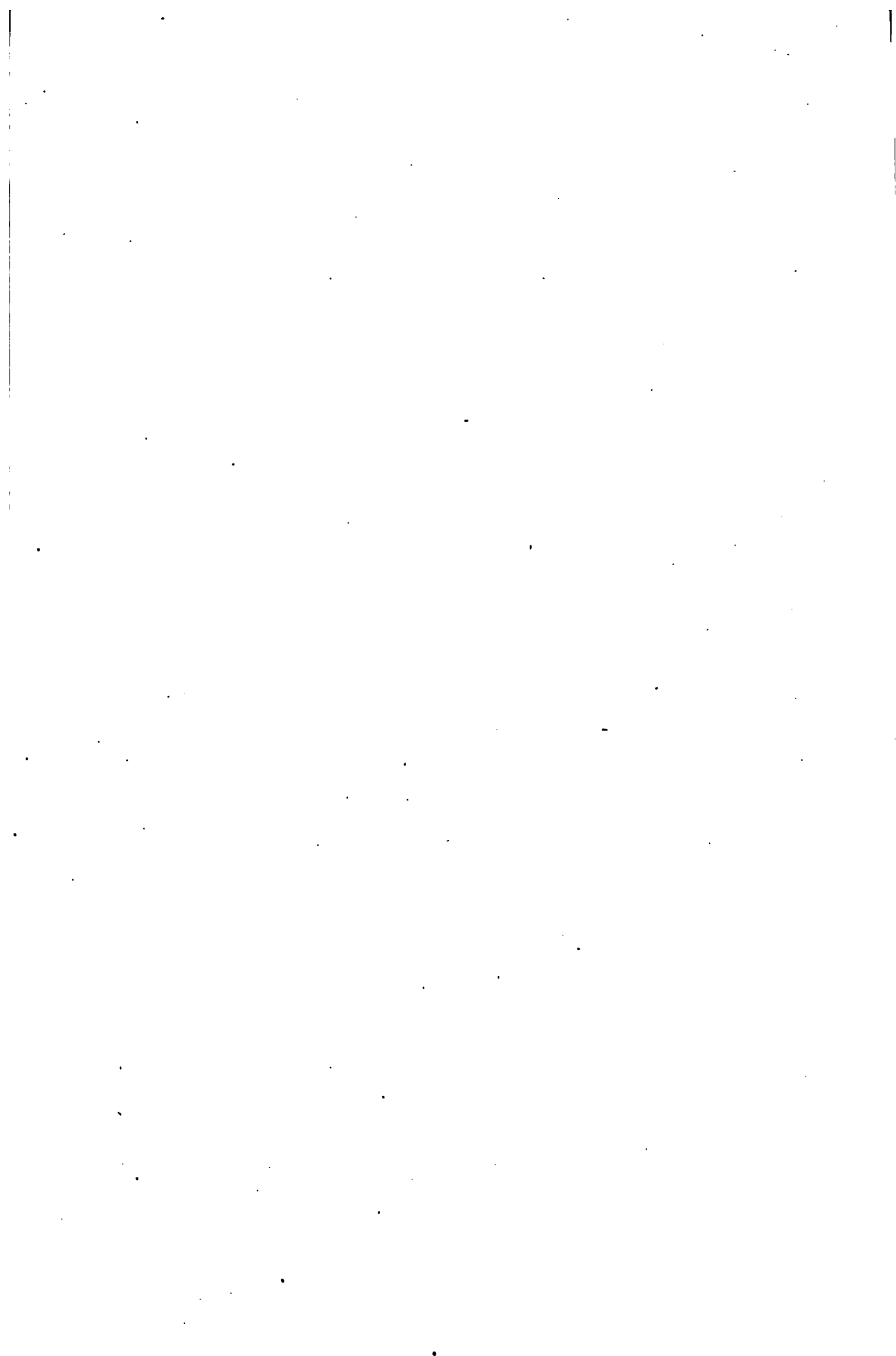
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FROM BIRTH TO BRIDAL.

VOL. II.

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FROM BIRTH TO BRIDAL.

BY

MRS. DAY.

"Each soul lives, longs, and works
For itself, by itself, because a lodestar lurks
An other than itself."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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FROM BIRTH TO BRIDAL.

CHAPTER I.

THE Summer wore on, and George Harrison came home for his holidays. He was grown, and looked strong and brown, and, as Mr. Lane had supposed of him, he was a capital cricketer, and first-rate at football; his masters found no fault with him, but no proficiency in his studies was reported.

Dr. Harrison looked grave, and said a few hasty, bitter words; but his boy's fair face and cheery ways disarmed the father. Only when left alone in the evening with Vera did he give vent to his disappointment in his only son; to her he would bitterly lament his loneliness, her mother's early

death, and her own want of care and heed in many things—and yet he loved his children.

Poor Vera, she never answered for herself, when she found a good opportunity, she would say every kind word for, and tell every good action of, George. She never complained, for in her heart she knew her father loved her, but she was often pleased to think that Avoncourt was inhabited, and that its inmates were kind to her, and apparently cared for her; she thought a great deal about them herself, and went there whenever she had time, and a sufficient reason for going.

Dr. Harrison was on very friendly terms with Miss Norreys, and she talked to him sometimes of his children. Of Vera he spoke ever in terms of the deepest affection.

Thinking of her brother's regard for the girl, she endeavoured to learn all she could of her; she desired to know if she was really fit for the position in which he fain would place her, and also if she could be

happy with him. Julia Norreys knew too well that there were pains and penalties attaching to the one who might be the wife of Sir Bertram. She was also anxious that her brother should have the means of comparing this girl who had so attracted him with others, and she urged on Dr. Harrison to let Vera now take her place in society, promising that she would take her under her special surveillance; but Dr. Harrison was loth to give his consent.

“She is happy as she is; let her be a child as long as possible. Why should she go into the world, to learn its ways, to be made cold and hard by its misplaced praise and blame, or to have her gentle heart wounded by its neglect. Let Vera alone; we understand each other.”

“That may all be true in one way, but sooner or later she must face the world; and if I mistake not, no blame or praise will much affect Vera but that which she herself desires or fears. By-and-by she might

think you had not given her the chance of knowing as much as she ought of the requirements of her position in life, and at the fortunate moment when you could protect her by your counsel and influence."

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Norreys; I will think of it. She is going in a week or two to her cousin's wedding, and after that Winter will soon be here, and I fancy your brother said he should spend this Winter abroad, in order to get rid of his house in Florence."

"But Vera might go out to dinners with you, and to an occasional ball, even if we are away," said she, with a little smile, half amused at the feeling implied by the doctor's speech that Vera should visit only at Avoncourt.

He saw the smile, and understood it, and said at once,

"I know what your smile meant, and might have felt offended at it from another person, but I had no such idea as you fancied; Vera

cannot depend upon you alone for society. I rather referred to your own kind offer just now expressed, of looking after my little girl, and thought that she and I should gain a little time did we put off her *début* till your return to England in the Spring."

"Ah! now I understand. Why cannot people be honest and truthful to one another; how much annoyance it would save!"

But at the same time Miss Norreys set herself to find some reason for Vera's appearing in public before her brother went abroad, and she determined to give an entertainment at Avoncourt, if no other means could be found; he must have every opportunity of knowing the whole character of the woman in whom he appeared to centre all the affection of his ripe manhood; he must see her amongst other women, and, above all, see how she bore herself amongst men.

The object of this anxious care sat in

her room with Brand, the room that had been her old nursery, and the broad window of which looked out on to the garden, and talked with her over the packing of the white-striped grenadine dress, and silk petticoat, that had just been sent home in readiness for Isabel's wedding. Vera was fond of "finery," as she always called it, in a certain artistic sense of preferring beautiful colours, well-chosen contrasts, and delicate fabrics; but in the sense of personal adornment, she disregarded, almost disliked it, as a burden and annoyance to her. People sometimes chided her plain dress, and she always answered,

"How could I rush about with papa or George, how could I walk out with the dogs, or clamber over stiles, in anything better than I wear? Besides, I will confide to you a great secret, I believe cotton and rough stuff gowns best suit my style of beauty—rough and ready, you know!"

And so she dressed as she pleased, and

somehow always looked sweet and fresh, very much like a cabbage-rose only half-blown, and with morning dew still upon it; but, withal, there was an earnest sadness in the grey-brown eyes, and an intellectual cast of brow and feature, that contradicted her own opinion of her personal appearance.

Isabel Harrison was to have been married in the Spring, but, for one cause or other, the wedding had been postponed until this Long Vacation; and, amongst her other bridesmaids, she had asked her cousin Vera. There was a little trouble in getting Dr. Harrison to consent to his daughter's going to Brighton, but she urged it so strongly herself that he yielded the point, though at the same time he talked to her seriously against being led away by pomps and vanities.

On the day before she was to leave for Brighton, she called her dog Beau, and took her way across the fields to Avoncourt; she had some books to return, and she thought she must see Miss Norreys. Sir Bertram,

too, she had not seen for two or three days—some one had said he was gone to London.

George was out on his own occupations, and Vera went alone. The country was in its most glorious dress—the last crowning splendour of Summer; the season had not been hot or dry enough to spoil the verdure, and now in late August there was a perfect beauty, deepened by an intense surrounding calm. In such days the saddest heart seems to have time to breathe, the sense of oppression seems to be lifted—in such days one might dream of lotos-flowers and Islands of the Blessed. Vera passed along leisurely, thinking over much of her past life, especially of the last year, and there was a feeling of rest and thankfulness in her heart; perhaps it was the effect of the beauteous nature around her, or perhaps it was something of that inward “peace that passeth understanding;” probably it was derived from both these sources, for both had influence with her.

She met people that she knew, laughing and talking together, but she scarcely heeded the fact that she was alone. To the reflective mind to be alone is a necessity, and in certain states of feeling and of season it becomes an imperative one; and to a person whose life, by force of daily circumstances, is essentially active and practical, though the natural bent of character is meditative, solitude is at once a balm and a restorative.

Vera came down to Avoncourt through the beech-wood, so as to approach it on its most secluded side, and with an almost unconscious purpose of avoiding as many people as possible; for no one had she ever met there save the keeper, or a farm-boy—now, as she walked on, she saw in one or two damp places a foot-print—surely a recent one. Was Sir Bertram in the woods? Beau pricked his ears once or twice, hearing some sound, and at an angle of the ride she saw a figure, clad in grey some distance before her, wending in the same direction as herself,

but it was not the Baronet. It was nothing to her who the person might be, and yet she wondered, and sat down on a dry bank to allow him to get so far in advance that she might not come upon him. At last she went on, entered the grounds, and came through the Ladies' Garden, in front of the little drawing-room, and one window of the library; there was no one in the drawing-room, for she peeped in at the closed windows where she usually entered when Miss Norreys was there; so she passed round to the library, the low French window of which she had seen was open, and stepped into the room.

"No one!" she said softly, and laid her books upon the table; then she turned to scold Beau, who was barking furiously at a low reading-chair, from which rose a tall young man, who bowed deeply to her without speaking.

She coloured, and there was a slight embarrassment in her manner, for she felt

rather than saw the intense gaze of his soft dark eyes, as she said,

“There is no one, then, at home? I wished to see Miss Norreys. I am going away to-morrow, and I brought home some books Sir Bertram lent me. Could you—would you—should you mind saying this for me? Shall you see them—or, no—I beg your pardon—will you ring, and I will give my message to Carlo.”

“Ah! no—pardon me, let me give your message. I was bewildered. I did not know,”—and the colour came across his cheek as in that of the young girl—“I do not now know what to say to you. You are tired—you will rest,” for he saw her lean on the back of one of the great leather chairs, and that her colour had faded.

She thought surely she must be tired—she had never felt the walk too long before, and now—she smiled and sat down near the open window, and he stood leaning against the wall beside her: the sun shone

through the painted glass, tracing fair and quaint colours over her whole form, and a stray beam caught the wave of his dark hair and turned it into chestnut.

Both were silent, each occupied with the other, but he looked down upon her with eyes that read, and read again, the pages of her face; and she looked straight before her, seeing not the fountain and flower-beds, but studying as an effort of memory this face, newly and strangely presented to her. Soon she recovered her presence of mind.

"I believe I was very tired," she said. "I walked over from Salisbury through the wood. I often come here, as you may have supposed, from the unceremonious manner in which I entered; and then I was not frightened, but startled at seeing you. You need not tell Miss Norreys I was tired," she said, with a little blush, "or she will not let me come again that way."

"Which way?" he asked. "Did you not say through the wood? I have only

just come down through the beech-wood myself."

"Then it was you in front of me. Yes, I see you are wearing grey clothes; and I sat down to let you have time to get out of my way. How strange! And, after all, I meet you here!"

He dared not utter the words that were burning at his heart, "Are you glad?" but there was in his silence, and in the blaze of his eyes, something that conveyed his meaning to her. Her heart heard his heart, but they were in the world. There are certain received opinions, certain conventionalities that all learn, and from so early an age that they are obeyed from sheer force of habit; so even Vera, with her independence and her unconventionality, told herself that her heart talked nonsense, and heard falsely; that it behoved her, a young woman with a strange young man, to behave discreetly.

"You will, then, give Sir Bertram these books?" she said, rising with a gentle dig-

nity. "And tell Miss Norreys, with my love, that I go to Brighton to-morrow, and am sorry to have missed her."

"Yes, certainly. But you will have something—some wine—before you go? Let me fetch you some—I need not ring for a servant. See, I will go myself."

When he spoke eagerly a slight foreign accent struck her ear. And how was it that he divined she would have felt the entrance of a servant as an intrusion? She would have stopped him, but he was already gone. She took off her hat, and smoothed back the brown hair, and thought she was living a bit of fairy-tale.

He returned, bringing claret and glasses, and water, and a dish of grapes and peaches. The wine she would not touch, but the fruit pleased her, and she began to laugh and chat with him in her usual cordial fashion, having recovered her calmness. He poured out some water, and presented it to her with the most deferential air; and, as she put on

her hat again, he took up the glass she had set down, and drank from it, thinking she would not observe him ; but not the least look of his was lost upon her.

“I must go. Good-bye,” she said, and offered him her hand. “Are you staying here?”

“Yes, I am to stay a little while. I have just returned from Italy. Let me go with you—a little way, at least,” he pleaded. And across through the gardens, and up into the beech-wood they went, both happy, and at ease now, chatting of many things.

The day, which had been fair before, wore a new sweetness now, though neither of them would perhaps have said that it was sweeter for the other.

“I thought, as I walked here, nothing could have been lovelier, but see, the setting sun has made even beauty like this more beautiful. I think I like Autumn and sunset better than earlier times—there is such peace in them.”

“And I should have thought you would like the Spring, it is full of hope and promise, and you——”

“When one has had care and trouble, when one has as much as one can do, and when one is perhaps naturally a little moody, one wants assurance, and not promise,” she said, gravely.

“Just now,” he said, eagerly, “you were all bright, all smiles—a child; now you are grave and thoughtful—a woman! Are you two, not one? Now a muse, pointing with raised finger to heaven and spiritual things, and before a child, playing with flowers; a child that reminded me of an English child I saw in Salisbury, when I was here eleven years ago, her name was Vera Harrison. I must ask for her.”

“I am she.”

“Then I had not forgotten you—can you remember me?—no? Do you remember a sad day, your mother died, and I gave you

violets. I thought you were like a violet—
now you are a rose.”

“I remember a little, but I never was quite sure afterwards if I had dreamed that, or if it was a kind of fairy-story.”

“You called me a fairy-boy,” he laughed; and the two looked at each other, and laughed in concert. “I have not forgotten you at all, you see.”

“Nor have I forgotten that day; but my mother died then. I remembered her, not you.”

They walked on in silence now, till presently he said,

“You are going to Brighton to-morrow—when do you return?”

“Within a week; a cousin of mine is to be married on Saturday.”

“Then I shall hope to meet you again, may I hope it?” He spoke very gently and slowly, and bending down towards her, “May I hope it?” he repeated.

The firmness of her character stood her in

good stead. She could not yield to the impulse of a moment; a sort of choking sensation came over her, and then she said, with a smile and blush,

“If you are here, I shall see you. I am often here. Miss Norreys is very good to me. I daresay we shall meet again.”

Her voice and look were quite firm; but she was kind, not proud.

“Here is the stile leading across to the town-path—let us part here. Good-bye.”

Her hand rested an instant in his, her eyes looked once at his, and then she left him.

CHAPTER II.

“YOU are very late, Vera,” said her father, when she came in; “you ought not to be so late. Where have you been? Sir Bertram and Miss Norreys have been here, to see you before you leave to-morrow; they waited a long time. I think you might have contrived to be at home; but you do not trouble yourself much about my friends or my wishes.”

Poor Dr. Harrison was working himself into a fever of annoyance, but Vera laid her hand upon his arm.

“I am very sorry I am late, papa, but I fancy the still hot day tired me. I am sorry, too, to have missed Miss Norreys, for I went over to see her, and did not find her, and I came back through the woods—that is how I

did not meet them, I suppose. And, father dear, don't say I don't care for your friends—you know better."

She sat with him, and sang to him, and they played backgammon together, chatting the while about the news of the day, and his particular interests, and he read her one of the *Idylls of the King*, which had been recently published. The evening passed away swiftly, and the father blessed and kissed his child when she went to bed, and told her he should miss her all the days she was away.

At last Vera was alone, able to shut her door upon all the world, and look, and think, and be what she would ; all the evening she had sat with her father, and felt like one moving in a dream.

The wonderful day was over, and she could now try to realise what had passed. Surely there had been some spell, some enchantment at work. Every moment of the afternoon, from the time she started on her

walk, came in review before her ; every word and look of hers, and every word and look of his, returned to her memory ; the whole afternoon was as accurately defined as a photograph, and with that curious recollection of smaller details not connected with the main subject, she remembered the bright red fur and glittering black eyes of a squirrel that sprang from a bough as they passed below, and a pool of intensely black water, bordered with grass and moss of emerald green, and a tall spray of quaking grass that overhung it, its tiny heart-shapes defined in white upon the dark water, a pool that Birket Foster would have painted. And as she sat and thought, she became dissatisfied with herself ; what had she said and done ? How foolish and nervous he must have thought her—frightened at a stranger, and little used to society ! And then the warm blushes suffused her cheek and throat, for deep in her heart lay the most trying

thought of all—would he think she had liked him?

This would never do—she could not even bear the thought herself; she jumped up from the window where she was sitting in the star-light, pulled the long hair out of its braiding, and brushed it with the greatest assiduity. She did not even know this man's name. How foolish it all was! He was an Italian, and more deferential than Englishmen usually are, and she had been foolish enough to let him see she noted a difference in his manner. It was her own foolishness, not his ways, that annoyed her; but let it pass, he would forget the matter, and of course she would, and to-morrow she was going away. But as she fell asleep she wondered if he would be at Avoncourt on her return.

Sir Bertram Norreys had received a letter from Beltran a few days before, saying he should be in London at such a date; that

he brought his patron accounts of his property in Italy ; and that he was himself sent with despatches to the Italian ambassador in London, from the minister to whom he was secretary. Sir Bertram therefore told his sister that a young Italian protégé of his was in London, and he should bring him down into Wiltshire for a week or two ; and he went up to London accordingly, to meet him ; it was to this few days' absence that Vera referred.

When Sir Bertram and Miss Norreys returned from Salisbury, Beltran had gone to his room to dress for dinner, and on the library-table lay the books that Vera had brought back.

Sir Bertram was disappointed at having missed her, and was still more so when he found she had been at the Park.

How could she have come, and he not have seen her ? He made inquiries of the servants ; no one had seen Miss Harrison. He sat down to dinner, still gloomy, and speak-

ing of this occurrence; and then Beltran coolly answered that a young lady, fair and tall, had come across the garden with a blue long-haired dog, had entered the library window, had laid down the books she carried, and had commissioned him to say to Miss Norreys, with her love, that she was grieved not to have seen her.

“And then?” asked Sir Bertram.

“Then,” answered Beltran, with a little shrug, “the Signorina went away towards the Wood.”

“And you?” again asked Sir Bertram.

“I am here,” answered Beltran, with a smile.

After dinner Beltran walked with the Baronet down the drive, smoking; and then he sat quietly listening to some of Mendelssohn’s “Lieder” that Miss Norreys played. In his own room, alone at night, Beltran did not “search out his spirits;” he did not seek to analyse his own feelings, or pass the eventful afternoon in review; he *knew* he

had been happy ; it would have comforted Vera to know that he did not think her "foolish."

Would it have comforted her to see the grey glove she could not find on her return home, drawn from his breast, and laid with his watch under his pillow ?

Both awaked in the fresh early morning from dreamless sleep.

Isabel carried Vera off to her own room as soon as she arrived in Brunswick Square. She had, she said, so many things to show her ; but after showing her the set of pearls Mr. Paulett had given her, and the dressing-case, her father's gift, she began to talk to Vera of other things—of last year's holiday at Eastbourne, and all its details ; and then she asked about Vera's life and occupations ; and at last, "Is Uncle George coming up for Saturday ?"

"Yes ; he and George intend to be here to-morrow night."

"To see me sacrificed. Quite in order," Isabel said, bitterly.

"How can you say so? I am sure Mr. Paulett loves you, Isa. I was rather afraid, to tell you the truth, that it was you did not care for him."

"Ah! little coz, where do you get your wisdom?"

"But I am wrong, Isa. I hope I am wrong—quite foolish, and not wise at all. Only I thought if anyone loved me, and I had promised to marry him, I should be very happy; and you do not seem quite happy, dear. You are not angry with me?" for Isabel had turned away.

"No, not angry," she said slowly; "but—but you have spoken the truth." And she fell to weeping silently.

Vera was greatly disconcerted. She suddenly found herself the confidante of her cousin, who had formerly treated her as a child. Presently Isabel said, with a deep blush,

"Major Egan is coming to-morrow night. Did you know?"

"Is he? I am so glad; he was always kind to me."

"Yes, indeed; he had no eyes or ears for anyone but you. However, keep him to yourself to-morrow and Saturday; if you love me, keep him away from me. You need not stare so. Is it wonderful that I should have found out what a paragon he is? You and papa always thought so; why should not I?"

"But I thought you all considered him low-born—not a gentleman? I have heard you say so."

"Not me. But, even if I had, I do not say it now. What does it matter, if you love him, what a man is!"

"You love him! I am sure he never knew it."

"I never meant he should; he never must. Listen, Vera. I knew he loved you—ah! I see by your blushes you know it,

too, at last—what was the use of my thinking of him? I took William Paulett, thinking I was strong enough to hide my secret; he knows nothing. I should often have liked to have come to you or told you; but you were such a child, I did not think you even knew what *he* thought of you; and then my uncle was too ill for me to worry you.” And she fell again into long and silent weeping.

Vera sat down on the ground beside her, and stroked the one listless hand that hung down when Isabel was quieter.

“Let me go to Mr. Paulett,” Vera said, calmly, like a person who had decided upon a course of action. “*I* could tell him everything. He would blame you, perhaps, besides being deeply hurt; but anything would be better than for you to be wretched for life. Let me go and see him, and *the other* too.”

“Foolish child! these things may be done in books—have you read many romances

lately, dear?—but not in real life. Both those men would despise me for the confession. I could not endure that. And then think of my mother!”

“But *you* would not confess; *I* should take the blame. I should say it was my discovery and my disclosure.”

“And I should have to contradict you, dear, and that would make matters worse. Besides, though I should certainly be free of Mr. Paulett, I should not gain the other. Do you not know the dignity and self-respect of that man? He would bow his politest, coldest bow, with no smile on his stern lips he would acknowledge the honour of my preference, but he would have none of me. I think a man’s disdain would turn the brain of the vainest and shallowest woman. Don’t think, Vera, because I am beautiful, and know it, that I don’t know anything else, that I don’t admire your talent, and Marian’s accomplishments. Let me be, dear; I have one advantage in my

shallower wits, that I shall not suffer so terribly as you would have done, that I shall be content with less than you would want. You can be a help and comfort to me. As Tom says of you, I believe in you, Vera. Come to me if I send for you. Write to me often. Keep me in sight, but do not appear to watch me. And you can do something for me now—keep near me; if *he* comes and talks to me, do you answer him; keep everyone from me if you can—my mother and William especially.”

“But, Isabel, at least tell him——”

“Tell him what? That I do not love him, and do love another. What a silly story! Why, I could not mention that other’s name, and I like William as well as I should anyone else. It *must* be, Vera—there is no return or escape now; my word is pledged, my father’s word and honour, and my mother’s pride and vanity. I shall be as happy as I have often been at home.”

Vera sighed, and thought at home one

did not place oneself, one did not choose that for oneself, one had only to do one's best in the state of life where God had placed one; but in the other case one *did* choose, and Vera was distinctly of opinion she should like to be a happy wife, and both choose and love her husband.

. Mrs. Harrison came in and disturbed further confidences between the two, and at once began—

“What have you both been doing? Both been crying, I declare! You always were an absurd child, Vera. What have you been saying to Isabel? Preaching on the duties of wives? Isabel has not cried since she was a child, I believe.”

For a moment Vera was inclined to flare up, and make a sharper answer than would have pleased her aunt, but she was spared her “sacred duty of self-defence” by that lady's abruptly changing the subject to a question of the lace and ribbons for one of Isabel's dresses, to the settlement of which

she summoned her maid, and a milliner who was in the house finishing some details of the bride's trousseau; so Vera escaped to her own room, and thence, when she was ready for dinner, she went downstairs to her uncle, who welcomed her with his old affection, and talked of her father, and her home, and all her interests and pleasures, and was learning all about her new friends at Avoncourt. Presently Major Egan and Mr. Paulett came in together, and after greeting her, both exclaimed,

“What have you done to yourself? Oh! all your hair is gone!”

“Yes,” she said, laughing. “You see I am grown up now, and when papa was ill my long hair was so dreadfully in the way. I tucked it up in his bed-clothes once or twice, which was inconvenient. I was driven to get rid of it somehow. It does very well now, does it not?” she asked, making a little wry face, and turning round her head to show the coils of brown hair twisted about it.

"And you are fairer, little coz," said Mr. Paulett.

"Yes, I have too much to do at home, to tan myself like a gipsy in sun and wind, as I did at Eastbourne."

And then she was sorry she had said that word, for she remembered who stood on the other side, and she added,

"I was so happy there," but without looking up.

Isabel came in, looking her loveliest; she took her stand quietly by Vera, and bore herself calmly through the evening, though perhaps her air was constrained rather than cold. Captain and Mrs. Harrison were both in good-humour and spirits, and talked for all; and Major Egan's grave, proud nature gave no sign of any change in him; but Vera fancied he looked older or tired, but behaved to her with the most charming kindness, as to one greatly his junior, whom he honoured as a friend.

The next day Isabel would not ride, but

begged her father to take Vera instead of herself. Mr. Paulett was with them, and when Captain Harrison rode forward with Marian, Vera found herself beside the young man. He said a few kind words to her about indifferent things, and then all at once—

“Do you find Isabel looking well? I feared something had distressed her—is anything wrong? She has not had the happiest home in some respects. Do you think I can make her happy? What is it, little coz? Why do you not answer me?”

“I think you may make her happy. She is gentle enough. You will be patient with her? I hope you will both be happy.”

“I am a very silent fellow, I know. I never can say things, but I do love her. Could you tell her this? I will try to make her happy. Little coz, I am half afraid of it, do you know, and I don’t know why. If she should ever want you, will you come to her, for she trusts you.”

It was a long speech for Mr. Paulett, and he said no more.

CHAPTER III.

AFTER the morning's ride, Mr. Paulett left them, and appeared no more that day. He sent Marian and Vera a wedding-gift of lockets set with pink coral, and containing Isabel's hair, and a bracelet and bouquet for his bride. But quite late in the evening he strolled up to Brunswick Square, when he thought the ladies would all have retired, that he might talk a little while with Tom and Vincent, who would just have arrived, and be introduced to Dr. Harrison, who was expected by the same train.

He found all the gentlemen alone, as he had anticipated, and after his bow of introduction, he sat there nearly silent, and the only unoccupied person of the company.

The younger men were arranging the details of the morrow's ceremony, the doctor and the Major were playing chess, and Captain Harrison was giving final orders to the confectioners about the wedding breakfast. Paulett sat very still, but was thinking of many things, and little sentences escaped him now and then, showing the direction of his thoughts.

"My aunt and cousins arrived this afternoon at the Grand Hotel. I have seen them. Templeton (his best man) and Fred Sinclair are down at the Bedford. I hope Isabel will like Yorkshire. I am such an unlucky fellow, to have had no mother or sister, or anything for her to be able to go down and see the place. I had nothing but a horrid photograph to give her. I wonder if she would have liked to go anywhere else than to Switzerland or Italy—to America? My mother would have," &c., &c.

But of his own hopes and wishes he said nothing, except in so far as they affected his bride.

"May I come in?" asked Vera, putting her head into the room, and then leaning over the doctor's chair.

"Father, dear, can you leave your game? I do not think Isabel is very well, will you come to her?" and then she saw Mr. Paulett.

The doctor rose and left the room, and, as Vera followed him, William Paulett stopped her and kept her a moment in the hall.

"Is she ill, Vera?—is she unhappy? Deal honestly with me—would she like to break with me? Tell her it is not too late, I will forgive her, Vera."

"What is the matter with you?" she stammered; "why should you suppose such a thing?" Poor girl, what should she say, with both of them uneasy, to be perhaps unhappy?

"I do not know. I am restless. I should have liked to see her gay and happy. I think she used to be so, but it seems to me she has been dull and silent since she

has known me. Is it my fault?—for I am a silent, stupid fellow.”

Vera only pressed his hand, and bid him be of good cheer; and he went back to his hotel.

“There is nothing the matter with Isabel,” said the doctor, when he come down stairs again; “she is excited, and tired; it is very natural, she will be all right to-morrow.”

Then dropping his voice, and speaking only to Major Egan on the opposite side of the chess-board,

“Paulett seems a good sort of young fellow, but—what on earth made such a girl as Isabel take him?”

“Just that he asked her; and I suspect the mother’s influence—his position is a good one, and worldly motives go a long way with people; of course it depends upon their bringing up.”

“And yet she and my Vera seem great friends.”

The Major smiled.

“Your Vera is a great favourite where she is liked at all, and she is very unworldly too. You will forgive me when I say she is an object of the greatest regard to me; I am so glad to have made her father’s acquaintance.”

“Ah ! yes, she told me how good and affectionate you were to her always. I must thank you for it. People have sometimes told me I kept my child too secluded; but I have a dread of that cloven foot of the world; once stamped with that, the degradation of the character must almost inevitably follow. It is not so much that it makes people bad, as that it keeps good out, and you can never tell what form the deterioration may assume. My child has lived such a sheltered life that I doubt if she has a thought apart from me, or one she has not told me.”

The Major looked up quickly, and then down again at the knight he held between his fingers, feeling assured that of him Vera

had *not* told all her thoughts. Certainly the doctor was wrong in his conclusion, as many a father has been before.

"This young Paulett," resumed Dr. Harrison, "strikes me as a gentle, simple young man; he is not a fool, eh?"

"Far from it, but he is not a great man, and his intelligence is limited. He is a good landlord and master, they say."

"Then he is by no means a fool. He is very silent, and what he does say is of the smallest. Has he any tastes or occupations? How will he and his young wife, who has been brought up before the world, endure each other?"

"How indeed! I am not one of those who think a bond, and usage, and the habit of a life can assimilate people—the bond would in many cases be the very thing that would most tend to tear them asunder; but in this instance, as in many others that must be similar ones, things may not be so bad and difficult as you or I might imagine; the

standard not being very high, or there never having been any ideal, the short-comings are not so apparent—less is expected, less is wanted, mediocrity is content with less. As it takes the highest organization to suffer most, so it must to rejoice or to enjoy most. Deep feeling is the goldsmith's mark of the true coin of the noblest nature."

It was a noble soul that spoke to another able to understand it.

Isabel was "all right in the morning," and she looked very lovely in her white silk dress and veil, with a diamond star on her breast that Mr. Paulett gave her that day, and a bouquet of white flowers in a jewelled *bouquetière*, sent her by Lord Templeton, in her hand. She was followed by a train of eight bridesmaids, including Marian and Vera, wearing white grenadine dresses, and white bonnets with Gloire de Dijon roses.

Lord Templeton wrote, during the ceremony, on a leaf hastily torn from his pocket-

book, a very pretty copy of verses, celebrating the beauty of bride and maidens; and the Honourable Fred Sinclair, in returning thanks for the proposed health of the bridesmaids, read them aloud with much feeling, and amidst great applause.

The events of that day followed each other so closely, and there were so many things of no great importance to be done, that there was no time for private talks, or even for thinking. Isabel received all congratulations with her usual cool good-breeding; only when Major Egan paid her his compliments she turned pale, and dropped her eyes, her lips quivered, and she replied to him but with a bow. Vera saw this, but perhaps by others it passed unnoticed. When the carriage arrived that was to bear away bride and bridegroom, she was quite calm. Vera alone did she kiss twice, returning to give her the second embrace; and she whispered, in answer to her appealing look, "Don't be anxious, little coz. I shall be

as happy as other people are. William is very good." And then she was gone, leaning on her father's arm down to her carriage, surrounded by her brothers and their friends, to speed her on her way with a parting huzza.

There was to be a dance in the evening at Brunswick Square; but in the meantime Vera changed her dress to go for a stroll with her father and George. The doctor did not often take such a holiday, and he was bent on enjoying it with his children. He had no home to trouble him now, none of those little cares that, in his widowed state, he found so irksome. He felt like a boy loosed from school, and made himself agreeable and gracious to all about him; even his sister-in-law found him pleasant, and her little triumph was undisturbed. This was the first time he had ever seen Vera in general society, and he was very proud of her; besides, her uncle's affection for her, and Major Egan's warmly-

expressed regard, had deeply gratified him. He thought Miss Norreys was right, and that his child ought to take her place now in the world.

Major Egan went for a walk with the Harrisons. He and the doctor were becoming fast friends; and Vera was more pleased by the preference shown her father than by that she had herself received. He turned to her sometimes with a strange, wistful look; but the girl's uprightness and innocence were the same as ever, and he put back his disappointment, and nerved himself, like a noble gentleman as he was, to meet her on her own ground of friendship. He had come down now to Brighton, though the idea had at first been painful to him, that his absence from this event, so interesting to his most intimate friend, might not cause pain to Vera's tender heart. She had wondered two or three times how she should feel on meeting him again; but she knew she had no love for him, and was not

in the least inclined to flirt and play with him. He could not even tell from her manner if she had distinctly understood the whole of his devotion ; but it was best so, and he never tried to enlighten her. During those few days they were together he saw a sweet look of almost childlike solicitude rest upon him from her brown eyes, and he vowed to her his lifelong service.

He had brought her that morning a bouquet of roses for the wedding, and in the evening, for the dance, he brought her a handful of crimson roses for her hair, and once more he led her through the mazes of a waltz, once more he steered her safely through the hurry of a galop ; the hand did not unduly tighten its grasp, and the kind grey eyes were only kind.

“ I believe I do not honestly like dancing with anyone but you ; at least, I do not think I ever could. I have not danced a step since I saw you.”

“ I have been very much occupied at home.”

“Yes, I know. I simply never do dance with anyone but you. I spent all the Winter in Italy, when you were nursing your father. How charming he is!”

“Is he not? My home is not at all gay, but you may guess there are unusual pleasures and advantages for me in the companionship of my father.”

“Yes, the friendship of father and daughter is delightful, and advantageous to both. You know I am a devoted believer in friendship between men and women. I think, if they were only honest and true, especially to themselves, such a friendship is not only possible, but honourable, and beneficial to both.”

The girl's eyes gleamed softly upon him as she said,

“You have taught me to believe in friendship. I count you as my first friend—may I not?”

He gave her such a smile, and held her hand for a moment in his own, and then he drew her again into the dance.

"Dear Vera," said Mrs. Harrison to the doctor, "I am afraid she is a little bit of a flirt. Look at her dancing with Major Egan. They are the most wonderful friends. He might know better at his age!"

"Better than what? He appears to me a straightforward man, and is certainly most kind to my child."

"But, you know, he need not flirt with her, and put foolish ideas into her head. You know, too, his position was not always——"

"I know he is a gentleman, Marian, and a great friend of my brother's; and as for Vera's ideas, I am not afraid."

With the exception of Major Egan, Vera had neither more nor less attention and admiration than other people. She did not look for it; indeed, she would have been surprised had she met with it. When she went in to supper on the Major's arm her uncle saw her, and called,

"Come down to me, my child, there is a

place here." And she was perfectly happy talking to him, and by-and-by returned with him to the dancers, with his arm about her waist.

"Whole thing went off uncommonly well," said Lord Templeton, strolling with Mr. Sinclair and the two Harrisons along the beach. "Does you great credit."

"Bride was lovely! Wish I may be as lucky as Paulett some day. Not likely, though!" said the Honourable Fred, with his cigar between his fingers, and blowing the smoke through his nostrils. "No money, you see, and a good many brothers and sisters."

"Who is the soldier that dangled after your cousin—the man with one arm? He would hardly let me look at her. He has got an eye like a hawk. Does she like him?" asked Lord Templeton.

"Uncommonly," said Tom, gravely. "Wedding to come off next month. You are late, if you thought of entering the lists."

"No, I think I shall remain in single

blessedness a little longer. I don't want to settle down ; it is a different thing with Paulett, now—he is alone, and wanted a wife to look after him.”

“ I hope she'll be good to him,” said Lord Templeton, “ for a better, kinder fellow than Paulett does not live, when you have made allowance for his peculiarities ; he has a few.”

Now, Lord Templeton had good reason for the judgment he passed on his friend. Templeton, a strong, powerful man, had fought all Paulett's battles at school, and had been helped by him through many a difficult page ; and his crude Latin verses had been polished by him many a time. At Oxford the silent, studious man had gone with a serious countenance, and a secret pride, to see the athletic one pull down the river in the Exeter boat, or win in the match at racquets against the sister University. Paulett, not clever, only studious, was a capital foil for his witty friend—not impulsive like him, con-

sequently often called stingy, but it was not his nature to volunteer help of any kind, especially in money matters, and yet no one ever went to ask him, as Templeton knew full well, without receiving the assistance he wanted, and unaccompanied with word or warning.

“It is too ridiculous to go to bed,” said Mr. Sinclair; “do you two fellows come up to the Bedford with us. We’ll get a bath and some breakfast, and then Templeton shall take us a drive somewhere or other.”

“Let me amend the proposition, Fred. Suppose, after breakfast, we walk along the parade, and look at the pretty women. Then we’ll go into the club.—I know a man or two there; and afterwards we will pay our devoirs in Brunswick Square, and ask the two young ladies if they would like a spin out in the drag somewhere, and we will take any of the gentlemen that like, and you and I can get up to town again by the late train.”

CHAPTER IV.

VERA's little holiday at Brighton was soon over. Captain and Mrs. Harrison and Marian were going to Scotland, and they had asked for her to accompany them ; but Dr. Harrison shook his head, and she said, " Do not urge papa—he does not wish it."

So she went home again to her usual routine of life, not sorry, but still knowing that it was what people often call *dull*. She would soon be left alone with her father. George would be at school, and the Norreys were going in November to Italy. As she travelled home, she thought of these things, and was glad to remember the kindness and interest shown her at Avoncourt, the one place where she really liked to go ; and then

she began to wonder if she should find that young guest there, and was half pleased and half afraid of the notion of meeting him again. She could not quite recollect what she had said, and how she had looked that day; but somehow she was rather embarrassed at the idea of seeing him once more; and when she told herself that very likely he would be gone, that thought was hardly agreeable to her. When she got home, there were so many things to do, that she left off thinking perforce, and set herself to her everyday duties—went over, with Brand, George's clothes for school, and labelled and put away a quantity of preserves, that had been made in her absence. In the midst of this last occupation, a note was brought her from Avoncourt, running thus, and awaiting an answer :—

“MY DEAR VERA,

“I am so glad you have returned before the fine weather is gone. I

could not come to you to-day. Do you come over to me. the first afternoon you can spare. I want to talk to you about an archery party we are intending to give next week—next Saturday, I think. You will come to it, will you not?—and your father? Let me know by bearer whether you can come to me to-morrow or next day.

“Yours affectionately,

“JULIA A. L. NORREYS.”

Vera was very busy, and rather pressed for time, and, besides, she was, what?—nervous? So she only sent one word as answer, “To-morrow!” and she finished in the gravest and most methodical way the task she was about; but all the time her thoughts kept saying, “A party at Avoncourt!”

The same evening, after dinner, as her father was busy in his study, and not inclined for a turn in the darkening garden, such as he often took with her, Vera sat down quietly to her books; for though she was

her father's housekeeper and friend, and though she had arrived at the mature age of eighteen, she kept up her old studious habits, and read eagerly and rapidly, besides which she managed to take occasionally a set of language lessons. So now she sat with Goethe's "Egmont" on her knee, and a dictionary on the table by her side, and her fingers were pushed up into the masses of her brown hair, as her head leaned on her hand, and she was reading attentively when Sir Bertram Norreys was announced. A little shade crossed her face as she rose to greet him.

"I am disturbing you," he said, observing the shade.

"A little," said she. "Time is more precious to me than it used to be. As I have grown older I have more to do, and where study used to be the first consideration, all sorts of practical details of life seem to usurp its place. I will send for papa."

"Thanks; but it is hardly kind of you to find me so great an intruder, and to prefer Goethe to me."

She laughed, but did not answer him.

"You are coming out to see my sister to-morrow," he continued. "She wants your help about two or three things. Can you come over in time for luncheon? I shall be at home then, later I must go out."

"It will be impossible for me to come so early."

"Goethe again? I am glad my rival in your hours is no living one!"

"Yes, I have a German lesson to-morrow; but please don't make gallant speeches to me, or I shall be afraid you are quizzing me, and then I shall never come to Avoncourt."

"Do you dislike gallant speeches so much? Most ladies expect them."

"Do they, indeed? I have been very little in the world, you know; the more I hear of it, the less I think I like it. Why

should people make their very conversation and mode of expression conventional? One can never be sure what another really means. And if most ladies like pretty speeches, they must value their vanity above their common sense. So-called gallantry often makes me think you gentlemen must have a very poor opinion of our sex; you treat each other as individuals, but you have, it appears, a distinctly-marked set of rules by which you treat us as a class. This would almost preclude the possibility of your having a woman friend."

"I do not believe in friendship between men and women," said the Baronet, with a smile, as of superior wisdom.

"Then I am happy to say I do," answered Vera, warmly. "And you do not, because you have never had a woman friend."

"What are you two quarrelling about?" asked Dr. Harrison, coming into the room. "I heard a vehement tone in Vera's voice, so I knew she was interested."

"It was a mere discussion, Dr. Harrison, on friendship."

"Rather a vexed question, and one on which everyone will hold his or her opinion as long as the world stands."

"Thank you, papa, for that word *her*. I know you believe in the possibility of finding common sense in some, perhaps in a good many women; I don't believe you ever made a purposely civil speech to a woman in your life."

"My dear child!" and both the gentlemen began to laugh; and Vera having expressed her opinions, wisely forbore to make further comments upon them.

Sir Bertram challenged the doctor to a game at chess, and Vera, having finished the translation of the passage on which she had been engaged, sat down to her piano, and played in a soft undertone a number of Mozart's Andantes. The Baronet walked home under the star-light, soothed by the quiet hours he had spent in the Close. He

had gone there on purpose to enjoy the pleasant friendly intercourse of this girl, this woman, undisturbed by the remarks or interruptions of others ; having seen her alone to-night, he could go out to his other engagements to-morrow.

Sir Bertram had said nothing of his Italian guest, and as she walked to Avoncourt, Vera tried to banish from her mind all memory of her last visit there. She went this time the usual route, by road and fields, not by the wood path, but she kept thinking of every step of that way. She spent an hour or two with Miss Norreys in the little drawing-room, talking and planning for the afternoon party, and writing invitations.

"Come to me early on Saturday morning, Vera," said Miss Norreys, kissing her in farewell. "I shall be glad to have you. Let me know over-night if your father cannot send you in the carriage, for then I will send for you."

"You are very good to me, and I love

you," answered the girl, with dewy eyes.

And then she walked home again, wondering, Was he still there? Had he not spoken of her visit? Had he forgotten it? If he was there, why had not Miss Norreys mentioned him? Perhaps she should see him on Saturday; she should know then—or if not, could she ask either Sir Bertram or Miss Norreys?

She leaned more studiously than ever over her books, endeavouring to fill her whole time, and her whole mind; and on two days she went to the organist's and set herself to master an intricate Concerto of Schumann's.

At last Friday night came, calm and splendid in stars and moonlight. Vera had stayed away from Avoncourt all the week; Sir Bertram had called in the Close once or twice, but she had not been at home. And on Friday night Dr. Harrison said,

"You want the carriage to-morrow, Vera, at two? Well, my dear, you can have it, but

I am not sure I am wise in letting you go out to an entertainment like this one. Have you proper dress, Vera? I do not wish you to appear unlike other people. They must not say your father neglected you. But I do not know that you ought to go; you are made much of at the Park, but I question if it is good for you—if it will not turn your head. You think a great deal about the Norreys, but will they in time to come trouble themselves about you?"

"Papa, papa," cried Vera, "what does it all matter? We find ourselves amongst people who are kind and civil; we had surely better take things as they are, and be at ease. The Norreys are very kind, but they are not you; and I like going there very much, but I don't think I ever neglected for them anything you wanted done at home."

"No, child, I don't think you ever did," the father acknowledged with a smile, won from his gloomy thoughts by her

brave honesty; "and now about your dress?"

"Oh, papa, it is all right. I have a fresh white one, and Brand will turn me out, not as smart, but quite as properly dressed, as others are."

"Ah! Brand—she is very good to you, Vera. What would you do without her?—are you grateful to her?"

"I hope so. I should do very badly without her."

"Well, go and sleep, darling. 'Sweet sleep and pleasant dreams,' as you used to say when you were a very little girl. You know, do you not," he said, holding her fondly round the waist, "that you are my first thought and care. Thank God, you are a grateful child; had you not been so, with my anxious temperament I think I should have broken my heart."

"But, papa, you are everything. All I know, all I am, I owe really to you, and I never can be grateful enough. But try not

to be too anxious—it always makes me sad, and it makes you ill.”

The moonlight was streaming into Vera's room, and the scent of the jessamine climbing upon the wall outside came in through the open window. She stood looking out upon the garden ; there was just a faint idea of colour in the geraniums and petunias in the flower-beds ; the jessamine stars were pure white, and so were the great blossoms of the magnolia, and the burnished leaves of the latter shone quite green. There was no sound save the whisper and sigh that passed from plant to plant, from tree to tree, with now and then a shiver that seemed to cross them all from some far-away, unknown influence. To that far-away, and to the known Influence, Vera's heart bowed itself in silent adoration ; the beauty and mystery of the universe, even as she knew it, filled her with thankfulness and awe. As she turned from the window, she said, low to herself—

“What are men better than sheep or goats,
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves, and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.”

The next morning, at breakfast, some remembrance of the beauty of the previous night lingering about her, Vera said,

“Papa, may I have one of the magnolia blooms for my bouquet to-day? I think they ought to be called moon-flowers—they and white water-lilies. You have no idea how beautiful the magnolia looked in the moonlight last night. Do you ever change your mind about flowers? I like roses and violets of course, but now and then I get a different mood, and think of dusky Indian queens, with peonies for day-flowers, and magnolias for night-flowers.”

“On the grand scale, Vera,” he said, laughing; “but I understand your fancy, I think. Of course you can have a magnolia, if you like—George can get the ladder and

cut you one, but would it not be a curious bouquet?"

"Oh! papa," cried George, "I think it would be quite indicative of Vera's mood—superlative."

Just as they rose from breakfast, Brand came in with a basket in her hand.

"A servant from Avoncourt has just brought you this bouquet, Miss Vera, with Sir Bertram's compliments," and she displayed a lovely, daintily-arranged mass of roses, and hot-house flowers and ferns; "and a strange boy came with this little basket, saying it was for you."

It was a long narrow basket of white osiers, twisted over with occasional gilded ones, and inside, lying on damp moss, was a magnolia bud.

"*Embarras de richesses!*" cried George, clapping his hands; "who's your friend, Vera?—and what shall you do?"

"Wear them both," said Vera, with a blush.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Vera went to dress for the party, she put away the blue ribands she had intended to wear, and rolled her hair about her head without any ornament. At the throat she wore a brooch, thickly studded with turquoises, and at her waist her gown of white-spotted India muslin was bound with a Trastevere scarf, which her uncle had brought her from Rome. Brand looked for a minute rather surprised at the change in her young lady's toilette, but the present effect was very good, and would probably be unique, and so Brand was satisfied. She put on a hat of white straw trimmed with black lace, and set the magnolia in her band, and with her bouquet in

her hand she stepped into her father's carriage and was driven to Avoncourt.

Very soon other guests began to arrive, and to all of them was Vera presented, Miss Norreys taking her opportunity of informing the elder ladies that the young girl was her friend, and that she chose to introduce her into society. Vera knew nothing of this, and was simply and modestly, but gaily, herself. Some of the young people she had known before, having met them occasionally; and as the great drawing-room gradually filled, Miss Norreys said,

“I think, Vera, love, you might take these young ladies into the grounds; you know how best to amuse them. I shall not be long in the house, and shall find you somewhere.”

As she moved away at the head of the band, Sir Bertram came up to her and suggested that some of the gentlemen should accompany them—all, if they pleased, for he was going himself. Vera thanked

him for her bouquet, and he walked beside her to the sward in the park that had been mown and rolled for croquet, where they established a party with balls and mallets; and then on to the archery-ground, where they both stayed, and entered themselves as competitors for the pretty prizes awarded for the best shots.

Vera's bouquet was greatly in her way, and she asked if she might take it into the house; but Sir Bertram called a servant, who was standing waiting for orders, and bade him put it in water in the little drawing-room, nodded to Vera, and went forward to his shooting.

"Did Sir Bertram send you that bouquet, Miss Harrison?" asked a girl beside her, with a smile. "We heard you were a great deal here, and a great favourite."

A little smile went round the circle of girls, and Vera blushed under it for a moment, but answered quietly,

"They are very kind to me here; I am

quite aware how unworthy I am, but you see—I suppose, it suits them.”

And then another said, in a little malicious whisper,

“I wonder you can put up with us, when you have these grand friends, and can be here as much as you like.”

An angry light flashed in Vera's eyes, and then came a tear.

“I do not know,” she began, “that I have ever hurt, or interfered with one of you.” And then recovering herself she laughed, “How silly! why cannot you be happy, and let me be so too; there is room enough, and people enough, for us all, without any absurd jealousies. At any rate, pray let us be friends to-day—little quarrels are a bad compliment to one's hosts. If you knew me only a little better, Ellen Lambert,” and she laid her hand on the girl's shoulder, “I do not think you would have any prejudice or hostility against me.”

She moved away, and began to fit an

arrow to the string of her bow, and furtively wiped a tear or two from her brown eyes. Presently Miss Norreys and Lady C. joined the group; the band under the trees began to play, and the conversation became general and gayer under cover of the music, whilst from time to time there came a sound of talk and laughter from the croquet party; some of the guests lounged to and fro in pairs, and others again sat on the benches ranged round, and watched the game of the archers.

Vera was not a very good shot, but Miss Norreys promised her, now the butts were ranged, they should both have some practice. She shot off her arrows, and then unstringing her bow, she shouldered it, and walked down to watch the croquet game, which seemed specially amusing, to judge by the laughter it occasioned; however, on a nearer approach, she did not care to share in it, and thinking it would be some time before she should be wanted to shoot at the second

range, she mingled with the strollers, and took her way to the house.

She was hurt at the speeches made to her, and also was wondering where was the man she had met a fortnight ago? and who had sent her the magnolia in her band?

Two or three people still remained near the house in the Ladies' Garden, and there she herself delayed, looking at the fountain spray falling in rainbow colours in the sunlight, till her ear was attracted by a sound of music from the drawing-room. When she entered from the blaze of light outside, the room looked dark with the Venetian shutters closing its sunny windows, and she saw only her old master the organist seated at the grand piano, but she heard him speaking, as if in answer to some one. She came up the long room, and he saw her, but she laid her finger on her lip, and then held it up entreatingly, meaning that he should not cease playing. She put off her hat as she advanced, and occupied with that, and listening to the

music, she did not observe, till she was close to the piano, the figure in the darkest corner, who had been seated behind the performer, and who now rose. It was he.

Beltran bowed low to the young lady, who stood silent and surprised now, before the very man of whom she had just been thinking, and whom, had she spoken the whole truth, she was even desirous to see. Without ceasing the lovely and intricate strain of Schubert with which his fingers were engaged, the musician named the gentleman to Vera.

"Miss Harrison, let me present to you Signor Corsi."

A bow, a smile, passed between them, and then Vera seated herself beside Mr. Adams, and Beltran leaned over the piano, glancing now and then at the fair flushed face.

"Now, Miss Harrison, you play; it is your turn to delight me," said the old musician.

"I! oh—I doubt," hesitated Vera, feeling that the dark eyes rested upon her.

"Doubt nothing, but play. Give us Beethoven's 'Appassionata'; few ladies play Beethoven like you. I am your master, and should know; I am proud of you."

"Sing now," he said, when her fingers had discoursed most eloquently, "sing 'O mio Fernando;' stay, I will play; now sing with all your heart. You are not really nervous, only shy. '*Chantez, chantez, ma belle,*' as Gounod says. Sing."

Vera's clear voice rang out through the great drawing-room, in that soft, deep silence of Summer; the curtains swayed lightly with the faint wind, and outside one or two guests stood beside the closed shutters listening. Scarcely had she finished when, from a heap of music near him, Mr. Adams drew Niedermeyer's setting of Lamartine's song, 'Le Lac,' and once more the girl's voice filled the room. The mournful strain fell sadly on their hearts, and the young man repeated in a whisper,

"*Tout dit, ils ont aimé,*" and then they were all silent.

"Dear me, dear me! Mr. Beltran, this will never do," cried the organist; "a fine day like this, and you and Miss Harrison look as sad as January," and he dashed into a *rondo capriccioso* of Mendelssohn's.

"Music almost always makes me sad," said Vera, "unless it is sacred music, and then if not sad, I am resigned."

"Why are you indoors?" she said timidly to Beltran; "it is so lovely outside. Will you not come out?"

"Now? with you?" he said; "is it not well here?—there are no people here but ourselves. I am content. Ah! but you—forgive me. I will go when you please."

"It is well here," replied Vera, and sank once more into the low chair in which she had been sitting.

There was something in her air so gentle, so yielding, that Beltran placed himself beside her, and began to talk to her. He

had felt very timid of meeting her again, though he had desired it, and when he saw in her band the magnolia flower he had sent her, and the Roman scarf about her waist, he hardly dared believe it could be she ; he hardly dared to address this woman, of whom he had begun already to think so much.

“ May I tell you,” he began, “ how rare a gift of music you have?—the sympathetic voice, which is the Divine gift, and can be acquired by no study. It is no compliment this, seeing that we have no individual control over any good thing God has given us. But music makes you sad you say—and me too ; can you not imagine, too, in old, old days, that it might have made people mad ? How long it is since I have seen you ! I thought you came here often ; you have not come till to-day.”

“ Yes, I was here last Saturday, for a short time.”

“ And I was out all day with Sir Bertram, my patron.”

"What?—your patron? What are you here?—why are you here? I ask too much."

"Not at all. Ask, I will answer where I can. Yes, he is my patron—*Padrone* we say in Italy. I know no parents, no relatives; he took me, he never will be asked—he never will be thanked; he is fierce and wayward, and kind, too, sometimes like a woman; he educated me, he placed me with—the Minister; I am his secretary; he sent me to England on business of state, and when Sir Bertram goes to Italy I go with him."

"To remain?" said Vera; and then she wished she had not asked it.

"I do not know. I would prefer to remain in England, but Sir Bertram has always said to me I must work. I must do something for myself. How I wish to work, now I do not want help from others, I must make myself, and be myself."

The voice was deep and earnest. Vera wondered what the eyes were saying, but she feared to look.

"You like England, then," she said, as indifferently as she could. "I should not have thought you Italian, but English, except for a slight accent on some words."

"Sir Bertram always says he is glad I am like an Englishman."

"Does he care for you? is he your friend?—for he can be so kind and good. I have found him so."

"Yes, he is very generous, if you do not take that word in its widest sense. But I hardly ought to find fault with, or take exception to a man to whom I owe all I am; and yet—may I tell it you? you will not misunderstand me? I had rather not be owing all to him. As a boy he petted me, trifled with me, ruled me; his eye, his air, his beauty, all had charms for an untutored mind, but now——"

Her eyes were fastened upon him; she understood quite well, but something troubled her; to whom was he like? what

was the resemblance that came and went ?
She spoke musingly—

“ You are like him, I fancy ; how curious that a resemblance should arise between people who are much together, that a certain impress should be left on the outer being by the constant contact of two minds. Do not resemble him too closely in his pride ; not the pride of a high mind ; it takes an unusually noble soul to be truly grateful for favours.”

“ Ay, indeed,” he said eagerly ; “ but if one has wings, one must fly according to one’s own strength, one’s own knowledge, and not have one’s flight circumscribed by the power or at the will of another.”

“ You may be right from your point of view, indeed I know you are right, for without an independent soul here and there to cut its way through wrong to light and liberty, there would be more slaves than there are. But I was thinking, on the other hand, of him, and how hard it must be to have thrown away care and regard upon a

thankless nature. I hate the ingratitude that turns and bites the hand that fed and protected."

"God forbid!" he interposed; "you do not think so of me?"

"His life is very lonely, I should fancy," she went on; "he is proud, but capable, too, of being deeply wounded. I should not like to add another blow to one already stricken. He has known bitter sorrow, surely."

"I do not know. I know nothing of him but as my patron. People are afraid of him; his sweet gentle sister here is afraid of him—sometimes. Do you know him so well? is he so interesting to you?"

She blushed; she was troubled under this man's eager questions and scrutiny, but she answered,

"Yes, he is kind to me, and I value kindness. I know nothing of him but what I observe, and I think a woman is always sorry for a man's pain."

Then they were silent, only the musician,

sitting undisturbed at a fine instrument, poured out his music like a bird's song, unwearied.

"Why are you indoors?" asked Vera again; "did he not ask you to join his other guests?—did you not know he was receiving to-day?—do you not care for English sports and manners?"

"Yes, to all your questions; but I was out. I was engaged this morning—had not returned when you arrived, and when I came in, Miss Norreys had asked me to finish some trifling arrangements for her; then Adams came, and I——Can you imagine that a man can suddenly turn shy—for I cannot express better why I am here—that is the truth."

She smiled, and played with the border of her scarf.

"Women are often shy, and it is painful. I do not know why men should be exempted."

He was sitting with his back to the door,

leaning forward with his elbow on his knees, intent upon her, and he saw the smile suddenly vanish, and her eyes dilate. He was about to turn, when she spoke low and fast.

“Don’t move. Sir Bertram.”

The Baronet stood for a moment in the door-way, and a dark frown sat on his brow ; then he walked rapidly up the room. The organist saw him, ceased playing, and rose. Sir Bertram did not even see him.

“Miss Harrison,” he said, in a slightly raised voice, “I have looked for you everywhere ; it was your turn to shoot ; you were not to be found. By dint of asking everyone, I track you here. What brought you in ?”

His voice was rather imperious, and she grew quite calm under it. She raised her head slowly.

“I can hardly tell you what brought me in—an idle half-hour, perhaps. But—” pointing to Mr. Adams—“that is what

kept me here. Mr. Adams' music is to me irresistible. If I am wanted, I will come out now."

"Oh! Adams, how are you? I beg your pardon," he said, shaking him by the hand, "for not seeing you, but I came for this truant damsel;" then, turning to Vera—"will you come? You will just have time to shoot off your match before the bell rings. Come, Beltran, you will go with us. Have you been introduced to Miss Harrison?"

"I have had that honour."

"Come, Adams, the band is playing. Give your own hand a holiday. It is dark in here—the sunshine is fairer."

He took Vera's bow, and walked beside her, chatting gaily, his frown gone, his voice pleasant, soothed by her very presence; but there was something in his manner that Beltran had never seen there before, and which struck him deeply—a deference to this girl, a wish to please her, a respect, and

yet a personal pride, as if for something that belonged to him. Was that so?—what did it mean?

CHAPTER VI.

THE bell rang at five o'clock to summon Sir Bertram's guests to the refectory prepared for them. Vera had just shot off her last arrow, and though encouraged by Sir Bertram and Lady C——, who appeared pleased with her, she won neither the first prize nor the consolation. She was not much troubled by her own ill-success.

Sir Bertram offered the Countess his arm, and took Beltran with him to commit another lady to his charge. Vera stood chatting with Miss Norreys and some other ladies and her father, and gradually all the party was disposed of; as there were not cavaliers enough, the younger girls linked themselves together, and in a body brought up the rear.

Without appearing to have interfered in the matter, Sir Bertram had sent a gentleman who was staying at his house to escort Vera, and when she entered the room she was placed on the host's left hand, Lady C—— was in the place of honour, and Vera's position attracted no attention—her escort, too, was a stranger to most of those present. Everything was very bright and elegant, the fruit and flowers were beautifully arranged in baskets of rare china, and there was abundance of champagne and claret-cup.

Just before they rose from table, Sir Bertram said,

“It is so fine a day, and will be a moonlight evening, would it be possible for you, Lady C——, to defer your return till ten or eleven? Julia and I cannot give a ball, but if you have no better engagement would your daughters care to remain, and I will have a room prepared for dancing? If you say yes, I will make the suggestion public.”

"I think it would be delightful!—young people always love dancing, do they not, Miss Harrison?"

Vera smiled.

"Oh, if you both are agreed, I shall propose it at once."

So he stood up and made the proposition that at eight o'clock, when it would be growing dark, instead of going home, there should be a dance for those who cared to attend it. Most cordially was it received and accepted.

The company trooped out again; and other matches were made up at croquet and archery, and the house was left to the servants to prepare in all haste for the prolonged festivities.

Without drawing particular attention to Miss Harrison, Sir Bertram contrived to be much with her, and to keep her in sight all day. He would on no account have troubled or alarmed her by paying unmistakeable court to her; at the time his preference for

her passed unobserved, and only afterwards did various persons remember that she had been preferred. Was she herself conscious of it?—not in the least; she thought he liked her, and was glad, but beyond that her thoughts did not go; her very cordial manner to him was unconstrained by any *arrière pensée*; but how often people are deceived by the signs that should most surely have enlightened them!

As soon as the dew began to fall, Lady C—— and her daughters went into the house; their example was followed by most of the ladies, and soon lights were gleaming along the staircases and corridors, and in the rooms arranged for dressing.

Vera stayed a little, hanging on her father's arm, while she listened to him and Sir Bertram, and a gentleman who had lately returned from Africa, as they talked of foreign lands and customs, and compared various points of scientific information.

At last, seeing she was almost alone, she

tore herself away from the interesting conversation, and ran to join the last three ladies who were walking towards the house. She led them to the library window, which was open, as a nearer way, and on the steps, smoking a cigarette, stood Beltran, in evening dress, who bowed to her as she passed; in the room were three or four young men laughing and talking.

Maid-servants were passing to and fro in the corridors; so Vera left her companions to their charge, and went herself to Miss Norreys' room, where she found her friend just finishing her toilette.

"Here you are, darling, just in time to have half an hour's rest. Will you really not lie down?—are you not tired? You have been so good and attentive to people, Vera."

"Have I? I am very glad. I was afraid I had only been amusing myself. But you must be tired."

"A little, dear, but Bertram is so happy,

that I am glad to do anything that pleases him. What are you about there?—cannot Jane get you a glass of water?”

“I am putting my magnolia in water, to revive it.”

“Here is Jane with some tea for us; now let her dress your hair, it will refresh you, and she has some stephanotis, I see, for you.”

“For me! why? You spoil me, dear Miss Norreys.”

“It is your ball—your dance to-night, you know; it is your first. I told Jane to get you some fresh flowers—whatever she thought would suit you best.”

“But Mr. Beltran gave me this for Miss Harrison,” replied Jane. “I found him in the conservatory, ma’am, when I went in, and he asked my errand, and cut these flowers himself. I was for a rose, ma’am, but he said no.”

Vera knew that she was blushing, but the long hair over her face and shoulders con-

cealed her, and she said nothing. As for Jane, with the instincts of the true waiting-maid, knowing that this girl was a favourite with her mistress, she found it the most natural thing in the world that all others in that household should do her honour.

In the little drawing-room, to which Miss Norreys and Vera descended together, were Sir Bertram and Dr. Harrison, Beltran and some other gentleman. Vera found her bouquet, and in the great drawing-room the band was already preluding for the dance. Lady C—— came down, and most of the guests followed her. Sir Bertram gave one or two introductions to partners; the doors between the drawing-rooms were thrown open, and he called for a quadrille, asked Vera to dance with him, and led her out by the hand, saying to Lady C—— as he passed her,

“It is Miss Harrison’s first ball; I consider it my duty and privilege to select the *débutante* before all other ladies. Am I right?”

"Certainly," answered the Countess smiling, "you have chosen well, and I hope you, my dear," to Vera, "will enjoy your dance."

After the quadrille came a waltz. Vera was on the Baronet's arm, talking with him, finishing a discussion they had begun during the former dance.

"I do not waltz," he said at last. "I am sorry; do you like it? Ah! I see you do. Beltran," he called to the young man, who leaned gravely in the doorway.

"Beltran, Miss Harrison will waltz; he waltzes well," he whispered to her, "or I should not have decided for you. Try him."

And then he turned and left them to themselves.

When Beltran heard his patron's words he paled visibly, his lips and throat felt dry and hard, and he could not utter a word; but he was a man of will and courage, and he knew that if he could force himself into some action he should recover his self-con-

trol. He therefore said nothing, but bowing his head he wound his arm about her, and led her gently, stepping in time down the room before he attempted to turn her into the circle of the waltz. When they reached the end he took the flowers from her hand, saying,

“Let me lay them down, we shall crush them.”

He was quite calm now, and in another moment they were floating through the dance. Sir Bertram said to Dr. Harrison,

“I have been dancing with your charming daughter ; she is a most agreeable companion, and her conversation is delightful ; she has excellent sense and originality.”

The father smiled, and his heart filled with pride at these flattering words. Lady C—— had just before been praising his child to him.

“Who is the young man dancing with Vera now ?” he said. “I think you said he was a protégé of yours ?”

"Yes, I brought him up. I cannot tell you much about his antecedents; he was deserted, he was pretty, and I was lonely. He is good, rather headstrong, perhaps, but time may cure that; he returns to Italy shortly, where he holds an appointment."

Lady C——, meanwhile, had asked the same question, and received much the same answer from Miss Norreys, to whom, bending down, and speaking low, she added—

"Now, my dear, if it is not breaking confidence, do tell me, has not your brother hopes with that young lady? His attention to her is very great. I have always understood he was not a marrying man, but surely I am not mistaken in supposing he is serious?"

"I do not know why I should not answer truly so old a friend as yourself, but pray do not mention the subject. I believe you are right, but Bertram says very little."

"The young lady is flattered, of course, but what does she say?"

"Just what I do not know. Vera Harrison might be pleased, but hardly flattered."

"Nonsense, my dear Julia; think what a fine position for her!"

"Do you think so?" answered Miss Norreys, with a sad inflection of the voice.

"Would he be very much cut up if she said 'No'—eh, Julia? She may be flirting, though I don't myself think it of her, but I doubt whether she is not too much his friend to think of being in love; so I ask you, would he be very disappointed and cut up?"

"He would be disappointed, and very angry. But perhaps I need not fear that (you probably know he has a stormy temper), for Vera at least is heart-whole!"

"Ah!" said the shrewd old woman. Then bending one dark eyebrow more than the other, and looking at Miss Norreys, after one rapid glance at Vera, engaged at the further end of the room with her partner, not dancing,

but talking to him, she said to herself, "I doubt that too."

Beltran was saying to Vera—

"I see you have in your hair the stephanotis that I cut for Miss Norreys' maid. Do you like it?"

"Very much. It is not so deadly sweet as the Cape jessamine, and the shape of the flowers is so pretty. Jane wanted a rose, she said."

"Yes, but there was not a white one. Do you love flowers? I see you have worn a magnolia in your band all day."

"I like all flowers, but especially this." She took it out and smelt it. "I was telling papa this morning that a magnolia was a fit ornament for an Indian queen, and when I was speaking, this one was brought to me in such a dainty basket. I cannot tell who sent it to me," she said, dreamily, drawing the oval of the blossom through her fingers.

"And I dare not," he said, slowly and

softly, with averted face. She understood, and blushed.

Once more he took his partner carefully through the tumult of the waltz ; he did indeed dance well, but there was in his face a sternness and a look of pain that she did not understand, and it hurt her.

“Let us go into the conservatory,” she said, when the waltz was over. “It will be fresh and cool there.”

He obeyed her without a word. As she seated herself on a low chair, she looked up at him and said,

“Why did you not like to dance with me when Sir Bertram asked you? What has vexed you now?”

He set his teeth hard, and answered,

“I do like to dance with you ; but why should he have made me his deputy? Why should he have forced me to be your partner? Why could he not have left me at liberty to ask, and you at liberty to refuse?”

"I told you once before to-day you were too proud," she said, playfully. "One would fancy you had some hard and disagreeable duty to perform."

"No," he said, sadly; "but little things hurt one sometimes. The tiniest blades of grass show the way the wind blows, and I have been learning to-day more than I had expected how utterly nameless and unplaced I am; that I do not belong to this country and society; how dependent I am! But I beg your pardon for *entertaining* you with my vexations. Of course they are nothing to you, and therefore it is an impertinence to speak of them."

"You are speaking bitterly. Do not—it gives me pain. I liked my waltz so much, too!" she said, timidly.

"You did? Then will you give me another, when I ask for it myself? It will go far to soothe my wounded pride. Listen, they are dancing the Lancers now. A waltz will follow—is it mine?"

"Yes."

"I will leave you now; there are other ladies here—you are not alone. I will bring you some ice."

They waltzed together again, and then he led her to a seat beside Miss Norreys, and thanking her, withdrew.

A little later in the evening Mr. Adams accompanied some ladies, who sang one or two duets and trios of Mendelssohn's, and then Sir Bertram asked for Bishop's glee, "Blow, gentle gales," of which Vera sang the second, while Beltran, urged by Miss Norreys, took the bass, the organist expressing his pleasure that he had not neglected his music.

"Beltran can sing very well when he likes," said Miss Norreys. "Sing us a solo. Supper will be announced directly."

"Do, my boy," seconded the Baronet.

The young man sat down to the piano, and after playing the delicate accompaniment, sang Shelley's "I arise from dreams of thee," with expression and feeling. It

was too foolish an idea, but Sir Bertram, who was standing near Vera, thought he sang with intention, too, his dark eyes seeming to seek the girl's face, as from his lips dropped the words,

"A spirit in my feet
Hath led me, who knows how, to thy chamber window sweet!"

Beltran did not approach Vera again that evening, but perhaps that was partly because Sir Bertram did not leave her; she declined invitations to dance, saying she was tired, and when the carriage was announced she rose to go at once. Her adieux were very brief, as she left the room on Sir Bertram's arm. Lady C—— said a few kind words to her, and Miss Norreys followed her to kiss her in the hall. Beltran stood there looking stern and pale, and his was the last hand she pressed as she got into the carriage with her father. She was silent during the drive home; and when she sat in her own room alone once more, looking at the same lovely moonlight scene that she had seen the

previous night, the words of Beltran's song recurred to her, and she wondered why she felt so tired and sad, as if her life was completely altered.

CHAPTER VII.

ON the next day, Sunday, Sir Bertram and Beltran walked over to the afternoon service at the Cathedral, and returned with Vera to the Close, Sir Bertram talking much, Beltran silent. Both of them thought that Vera looked pale and tired, but she seemed pleased to see them, and took them into the garden, where her father was sitting in his old favourite place, on the broad step of the study window. The day had been close and hot, and it was pleasant sitting there in the open air, watching the shadows lengthen on the grass. Vera went into the house for a basket, and then asked Beltran to come down into the kitchen-garden with her to gather some

fruit. He went, but she fancied he was reluctant to do so, there being a distant courtesy in his manner, quite unlike the happy eagerness that had marked it on their first meeting.

In the garden they met George, who had taken a fancy to Beltran, and who began at once an interesting conversation with him respecting a day's sport. Sir Bertram had promised him in the Avoncourt coverts. Beltran knew little of English sport, but was a good shot, and was more familiar with guns and rifles than George was.

When they had taken the fruit to the gentlemen, and coffee had been brought out to them, George carried Beltran off to look at his equipments and old armoury, saying, as he went, that it had been his own and his sister's favourite haunt in childhood; then he bethought him that he had left her behind, and turning called to her. She shook her head, but the little sign of opposition made him desire her more, and

he called her again. Then she went with them.

Beltran was, if less amused, more astonished than Captain Harrison had once been at this museum, and he asked if all English girls cared for such things.

"No," said George, proud of his sister's superiority, "certainly not. Many of them would scream at a gun, and declare it was loaded, though you swore it was not; but Vera is a very fair shot, and knows lots of things."

Beltran laughed, and looked at her; he had taken down a foil, and was admiring it.

"That is Vera's," said George, "and she can use it very well, too—can you not, Vera?"

Beltran unhooked another, presented her with her own, and put himself into a posture of defence.

"Will you cross swords with me?" he said.

She fancied that there was in his voice a mocking tone, which fired her, and she

accepted his challenge. They were both quick-eyed and dexterous, and George encouraged his sister. At last Beltran dropped his point, saying,

“You are too skilful for me ; unless I were to fight you in downright earnest, you would keep the advantage.”

“I was in earnest,” said she—“were not you?”

“Too much so, I fear,” he replied, with a meaning look.

She coloured scarlet, laid down the foil, and, nodding to her brother, left the place.

“What have you said to Vera?” said the boy eagerly—“why do not you two like each other? I like you very much. I should have thought you must have liked her.”

“But I do like, admire, respect her, George,” cried Beltran. “I am grieved if I have offended her.”

“Shake hands, then. I don’t understand what you said, and I am only a boy to you,

but you must not be rude to my sister. *You* don't know what a brick she is."

Vera was sitting beside her father in the drawing-room, when George and Beltran returned. Sir Bertram was waiting to go home.

"You will come up to see Julia soon," he said to Vera. "She may come down for you, though, to drive with her."

"Yes, I will come one day."

Vera's fingers rested for a moment in Beltran's; his soft eyes wore a wistful look, but she never lifted hers, and did not see it. When she was alone a rush of tears came to her eyes, which she dried indignantly. What was this man to her?—why should she heed his praise or blame? A stranger—why should she feel his unkindness? Soon to be gone—but of that she would not think.

Sir Bertram, walking back with Beltran, expatiated on Vera's charms—her voice, her air, her sense, her talent.

"To-day, when she was tired and languid, it only added to her charms. There is a tenderness and timid pride about her I have never seen equalled. . Do you like her, my boy? I fancy so, I hope so, as—she may be much your friend—I trust, I hope one day she will be my wife. Remind me to show you some splendid pearls of my mother's, that the mistress of Avoncourt shall wear. I have never seen any woman but this one worthy to wear them."

Beltran shuddered; he had just hurt her with a foolish speech, his heart ached to think of it, and now his prophetic fears of yesterday were confirmed! But what was he?—how dared he think of her? he asked himself in bitter irony. He said, aloud—

"You have asked her, then?—and she?"

"No, not yet; but still I hope. I am so much older than she is that I must not be precipitate; she has been cordial, much interested in all matters that affect me, and

has never shewn the smallest preference for others, so I hope. I shall be home from Italy in the Spring ; the short absence will make her know better than aught else what place I hold in her regard. Do you not think so ?”

“ Perhaps.” Then, thinking his short answer would appear scant of courtesy, he added, “ She is very charming, and has simple, unaffected manners. I should think she was very sincere.”

It cost him an effort to speak thus, but Sir Bertram looked pleased ; and, after all, what could it matter to him—he was going away and would be forgotten.

He sat down on the border of the fountain which she liked, that moonlight night, and laid his face between his hands, trying to devise some plan for himself. Many times he decided that he would return to Italy at once, and he rose, intending to go immediately to Sir Bertram and tell him his resolution, but as many times he re-seated himself, de-

termining to stay, while he cursed the evil fate that had brought him to England at all. He had not even the satisfaction of feeling that she should, at least, know his devotion. How should he dare to approach the woman who doubtless knew the brilliant lot that might be hers? She would scorn him, nameless and penniless as he was. The attraction of a day had grown into an overwhelming passion, which was increased even by the admission his patron had made to him. He had fancied yesterday what he knew to-day; and what fairer, worthier choice could Sir Bertram have made? It was so natural, though hateful to him! And would she accept his offer? Of course she would—why not? She certainly preferred Sir Bertram; her manner to him was trustful, and even affectionate; and yet, when he compared with it every word and look addressed to himself, his heart, from some latent instinct, rose, but sank again into deeper darkness. “Even were it so,” he said, aloud, “the merest

worldly prudence would operate against me. Who could blame her?—who could wish it otherwise? Not even I—not even I! God help me! who am I to have so much as a thought about her? Nameless, penniless, and a stranger! What brought me here? A chance, a scurvy trick of fortune, the turn of the dice in the game of life. I was not of any account—I never valued myself at a high rate; what could have been the object in subjecting me to further humiliation and greater pain? I was alone before, now I feel in darkness. Thou in Heaven—Thou that didst make me, Thou that knowest, shew me, for I am blind, the way to go.”

He lifted up his face to the bright heavens, and earnestly prayed for help and strength; the moon and stars shone down upon him out of the steel-blue sky, but there came to him “no voice, not any that regarded.” Yet within himself arose a calm and stern resolve, and a certain course of action shaped itself in

his mind. He would try to live up to that, cost him what it might ; he was young and strong. Had he ever lived before ? He would begin to live now. He would take this solitary life of his, and twist it into a crown, and wear it for her sweet sake. "To bear is to conquer our fate." Conquer it!—that was the word he wanted !

Vera did not go to Avoncourt, and when Miss Norreys came to see her, she excused herself both from returning the visit and from driving out ; she had a cold, a headache—she had been over-tired at the party. But Lady C—— gave a dinner-party, and Dr. Harrison and Vera were amongst the company, as were also Sir Bertram and Miss Norreys, but Beltran was not there. At the first moment the girl felt relieved, but afterwards regretted his absence, and when she went home tired, expressed to her father a great dislike to parties in general. Dr. Harrison was pleased at his daughter's apparent dis-

leaving at the same time for London, she hoped Vera would come to her as often as she could before then. Vera knew how still her life would be, how deserted she should feel when Avoncourt was empty, and readily promised.

She sat in the little drawing-room, and worked or read in the afternoon with Miss Norreys, or they walked together up and down the Ladies' Garden in the freshening Autumn air, talking of many things, but especially of their meeting again in Spring. One or two severe night-frosts had blackened the dahlias and heliotrope in the more exposed borders, but in this sheltered spot Summer flowers were lingering still. Sir Bertram came and went much as usual, sitting down with them for half an hour sometimes, and coming especially when he wished to ask advice or information about some alteration or improvement in the house or grounds, thus contriving to get Vera's opinion. Had not the girl been pre-occupied,

she must have perceived his consideration and solicitude for herself; but she was often sad and absent in manner now, and Miss Norreys constantly asked her if she was ill, and supposing she was grieving because of their intended six months' absence, would console her for this imagined cause of depression by telling her of plans for the future, and the many happy days in store for them to be shared together; adding, that it was her brother's intention, after this visit to Italy, to remain entirely in England.

Vera often saw Beltran; but after greeting her, he would leave the room, as if he were not one of them; or if he passed through the gardens, and met the two ladies, he would stop for a moment to speak to them, and then go on his way. His air and voice were usually calm and cold, but sometimes he would speak hastily and bitterly.

One Saturday—the last to be spent at Avoncourt—Vera was sitting with Miss

Norreys in the sun, outside the drawing-room window, when Beltran came out of the house in a black velvet shooting-coat, and a grey wide-awake hat, with a tuft of partridge feathers in it; he was wearing strong shooting-boots, and his gun was under his arm. He stopped to shake hands with Vera, and Miss Norreys said,

“Oh! Beltran, I wanted you to cut some grapes and flowers for Miss Harrison. There are some late roses in the lower greenhouse; I should like her to have them.”

“I am hardly a good enough judge to select the flowers likely to please Miss Harrison, and I was just going out. Would you allow me to go down and tell one of the gardeners to cut them?” He spoke very courteously, but plainly refused the commission; then, turning to Vera, he said slowly, offering her his hand, “This must be good-bye, for I shall not see you again.”

He looked at her, and holding her hand

a moment, bowed, and went. Vera's heart stood still, but she made no sign:

"Do you like him?" she said, after a long pause.

"Yes, dear, very much; he is most considerate to me, well-informed, agreeable, and a gentleman. I had a prejudice against foreigners, but he never seems to me like one; his ways and views are quite different. But Italians are hardly like other foreigners; they are far more liberal and better-behaved. Of course I am not taking into account men of the highest order of intellect; their brotherhood is not national, but cosmopolitan. But Beltran might have been a little more polite just now; I fear he is inclined to be selfish, like many other young men."

Vera sat watching the tall, athletic figure as it disappeared under the trees of the park, walking in the opposite direction to the road she must take; and when the gardener brought the fruit and flowers, she got

up to go home. She declined the attendance of any of the servants to carry her basket, or take care of her, saying she particularly enjoyed being alone—that it was so dry, she should walk home through the woods, as it was probably the last time she should be able to walk there for months to come. No, she was not afraid; she did not want anyone; she was glad Sir Bertram was not at home—she preferred to be alone. Then came a long and tender embrace, for these women loved each other, and after many promises to write, and many expressions of their hope to meet again, Vera, uttering a fervent “God bless you!” called her dog, and passed through the gate into the silence of the woods.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Vera first struck into the wood, she walked rapidly until she came to the denser part, where the underwood stood close about, and overarched the ride. Here she slackened her pace, for she was weary, and her thoughts drifted absently away from her; she could have given no distinct account of them, for her frame of mind closely resembled that of a sleep-walker.

The ferns were brown, the mosses had turned yellow and brown and olive-green, the ground was strewn with fallen leaves, and every now and then the light air brought down a fresh cloud of them from the red and yellow masses that hung over-

head ; there was not a flower to be seen, but many bunches of grotesquely-shaped, harshly-coloured fungi. She looked at the dark pool that had pleased her fancy some weeks ago, but the light now played straggling on its surface, which looked a dirty white over a hidden depth of darkness. She looked, as she passed under the beech-wood, at the tree on which she had seen the squirrel springing ; the leaves were burned to a copper colour, and rustled against each other, withered and dying. As the evening drew on, the air felt more chill, and the clouds hurried by, not sailing slowly and majestically as in a Summer heaven ; it was very still, and all things seemed to wait breathless for the change of which they appeared to have a presentiment. A robin sang from a holly-bush near her, and as the girl went up into the pine-wood, there came a deep sound of sighing, which ebbed and flowed with the swaying of the dark green tops. Below there was no change, only shadow and silence, and the

lower boughs were not stirred. In the west the sun burned low and red, and a stray gleam showed the rich and varied colours of the trunks, and of the moss and lichen that clung to them here and there. The air was almost warm, and Vera sat down upon a bank strewn with fir needles.

As she sat there thinking, it seemed to her that her life was like that of one of those trees which might shoot out its roots here or there. Though in some direction its growth might be checked, yet the tree must grow, for the instinct of life is paramount in all creation, and the roots would spread and strengthen themselves some other way; but the tree would neither be so fair, nor could its existence be so pleasant, as if it had grown without a hindrance, and stretched its boughs freely on every side.

Inexpressibly sad became the tone of Vera's mind, and deeper her sense of solitude; not the sadness and solitude of the present moment only, but such as come un-

bidden to thoughtful souls, whether to show them the emptiness of all that pertains to earth, or to direct them to heavenly things.

Suddenly she was startled from her reverie by the furious barking of dogs, and she perceived that Beau had strayed from her side into the wood. She stood up, calling and whistling for him; she had always been careful to keep him from invading the preserves, but just now she had forgotten to watch him, and he had taken advantage of her negligence. She knew his voice now as he fought and growled; she began to climb up the bank with the intention of going in the direction of the noise, when, rolling over one another, came poor Beau and a great lurcher, who had been poaching. The two angry creatures fought and tore at each other in the path before her. What to do Vera did not know, as she had neither stick nor umbrella. Beau's long hair gave his adversary a great advantage, and knowing his courage and obstinacy,

she feared with good cause for his life. Once the poor little animal screamed, and Vera echoed his cry, as if she felt his hurt. She shouted sternly at the strange dog, and looked about for stick or stone, but in vain. After another roll over in the dust, and another scream from Beau, she perceived a great stone set to mark the pathway at a turn a little further on; and this she tried with all her force to dislodge. It yielded; she lifted it, and was carrying it staggering, when another dreadful scream from Beau made her almost drop it, and she lifted up her voice and cried, "Help! Beltran!—help!"

He was coming down, through the trees, running fast. Had she heard or felt the sound of his rushing feet? He had heard her first cry far away—so far, he thought he should never reach her; and, as he came nearer, he learned the cause of her terror.

"Stand still!" he shouted; "do not touch them!—do not move!"

In another moment a shot rang through the woods, and the lurcher reeled over and expired with one stifled cry. Beltran sprang off the bank into the path, where Vera stood with the great stone still in her arms. She was very pale, and trembled as he looked at her, her eyes seeming to have grown larger and darker. He took the stone gently from her.

"What a weight!" he said, with a flickering smile; "and you would have dropped that on the brute?"

"If I could," she breathed, rather than spoke.

"You might have crushed them both, or perhaps enraged the lurcher against yourself; and he would have left Beau, and fastened upon you."

"I would have done what I could," she answered, fiercely. "I was not afraid, except for Beau. I screamed because he was hurt, and I could not help him—poor, brave little fellow!" She turned away with

the tears in her eyes, and walked quickly to where the dogs lay.

He watched her, her tears touched him, but he was minded to leave her at once. She hesitated a moment at the spot, for a horrid sight was there; but, with a low cry, she sprang forward, and, kneeling down, drew away her poor little favourite, who, even in death, had kept firm hold of his enemy. She sat down upon the bank where she had sat before, with her dead dog by her side, and her hand upon it; she remained quite still, neither crying, nor uttering a sound, and seemed to have forgotten that Beltran was there.

Should he go?—He could not. It would be too cruel—too heartless. He went to her, and kneeling on one knee by her side, touched her gently; she looked up.

“What are you going to do?—it is getting late. Had you not better go home?”

She tried to speak, but failed; at last she said,

"Did you shoot him, too?" and then a few tears rolled from her eyes. "Don't be afraid; I am not going to cry. I will go home; but I didn't know how to carry him."

"I will carry him. Poor little fellow! that vagabond was too big and strong for Beau, with all his valiant heart. I am so sorry for him, and for you too." His voice and eyes were very gentle now. "What made you call me? Did you see me in the wood?"

"No; I thought you went quite the other way. I don't know why I called you; it came to me to call. I thought you would help me if you could—at least I thought so a few weeks ago."

"You see you were right then and now."

"Then why have you lately been cold and rude to me?—what have I done? I do not want your kindness or regard if you prefer to withhold them, but I do not think I deserve scorn or unkindness. Perhaps once, the first day I saw you, I annoyed you

- by seeming to like you, and to be pleased to talk to you. I do not know if it was so, but I am sorry if I annoyed you. I quite understand that people are not bound to like each other. I shall never see you again, and so we may as well part friends."

He bent his head, and answered very low,

"You do not know what you are saying. Do not try me too much. I cannot, dare not say all I would. Do not blame me more than you can help. Let us talk of something else. But 'part friends,' you say. Yes, indeed, if you only knew——"

He had been unfastening his gaiters, which he laid in his handkerchief, covering them with handfuls of long grass and fir-needles, till he had made a bed for the mangled dog, on which he placed it, and then tied the corners of his handkerchief together. She got up, and they walked slowly side by side, in silence.

"Did you shoot them both?" she asked at last.

“Oh! no, only the lurcher; he had strangled Beau. I feared I could not get to him in time, from the sounds I heard. I fancied you would go home through the woods, and I wished at least to see you again, even if I did not speak to you.” She said nothing, and was looking on the ground. He went on: “There should be nothing doubtful in a gentleman’s conduct, and I have felt I owe you an apology for mine, and yet I cannot explain it to you without speaking of matters on which I should be silent.”

“Have I offended you in any way? The first time we met you seemed happy and glad to have met me, you wished to see me again, and now——”

“I did not know,” he answered, passionately—“I did not consider. I was wrong in my haste. No, not wrong then, but wrong now. I ought not to be here, and yet how could I help it? Not to see you again was terrible, and to be with you now,

and know it is for the last time, is even worse. Can you find it in your heart to blame me, to be cold and haughty, as you have been? I know how undeserving I am of your least smile. I know how utterly—I am nothing, but yet—my heart—oh! forgive my rash words—I have no right——”

He turned to look at her, and saw in her face no haughtiness, but a sweet trouble; a deep blush had risen in the cheeks so pale just now, and as her eyes met his a tell-tale smile played on her lips.

“You care for me,” he whispered. “Fool and blind I was to destroy the happiness of these days by distrusting it and you! Can you forgive me?”

“Hush!” she interrupted him. “I am content. Let us remain friends. I will not think of these cloudy days. I can now keep a pleasant memory of you.”

After all, he thought, she keeps me at a distance. Was it only that her vanity and self-love were hurt? Why should I wrong

her with such a thought? She is quite simple and straightforward. Let me not forget my own nothingness.

She began to talk to him with a certain shy tenderness. He was with her, and that was so much ; that present joy was all she needed for the moment. The children of the bride-chamber can never mourn whilst the bridegroom is with them !

Arrived at home, Vera took her companion into her father's study, to tell him the story of poor Beau's death ; and Dr. Harrison, who had fretted for Vera's long absence, and the falling darkness, was greatly relieved to find she had not been alone. He received Beltran very cordially, and talked with him about his life and occupations in Italy—of the political condition of that country, and its probable future. Beltran was surprised to find an Englishman, living a life so retired, so well informed of, and interested in, the matters that engaged himself every day ; and Dr. Harrison was

pleased with the courteous attention of the young man, and with the evidence he gave of a studious and pure life. The sympathy between a young and old man is much greater than is often supposed, but the characters of both must be unaffected and upright, so as to leave no room for suspicion of any sort.

The next day Beltran spent some hours with the organist and his wife, the latter of whom especially had never ceased to feel affection for him. Sir Bertram joined him in the Cathedral at afternoon service, but they did not go to the house in the Close. Vera and her father walked part of the way to Avoncourt with them, and Beltran found an opportunity to say to her,

“ I do not say to-day, I shall not see you again ; but I say this ; when the Padrone returns in Spring, I also will come. I shall see you again, if you wish it. During this Winter I shall do my utmost to get the

post of attaché to our embassy in London. If you do not forbid me then, I shall take it—if you do, I shall return to Italy. In six months we shall see.”

And Sir Bertram, too, in bidding his adieux, said,

“ In six months.”

On Monday they were gone, and Avoncourt was left within doors to the housekeeper, a few servants, and certain work-people, under the supervision of Mr. White the steward; while out of doors the gardeners tended their vines, and filled up the greenhouses against the coming Winter, when rain and wind and frost had their will over all the pleasant places.

CHAPTER IX.

SOMEWHAT monotonous and uneventful was Vera's life, and she was now entirely occupied with the old routine of home duties, and some voluntary studies; but the old channel of thoughts had been broken up, and their stream was hurrying on a new and unlooked-for course.

In six months—what? All was vague and uncertain. What was this dark-eyed man to her—this stranger? Why should she be interested in him? There was no use in dwelling on the matter; they had parted, and parted friends—she was glad of that. She should wish him well always, but she must think no more of him, because she found it hindered her daily occupations,

even making them irksome, and herself sad and absent.

So she deceived herself, and did not realise that the strength of will which made her thus resolve, was deeply rooted in the hope and belief of Spring.

She had been asked to spend Christmas at Brighton, with her uncle and aunt, and also in Yorkshire with her cousin Isabel ; but she declined to leave her father ; and Captain Harrison came with his family to stay in Salisbury instead. Mr. Lane, too, was a guest in the house in the Close.

The Winter was very severe, and Vera, who was a good skater, persuaded her cousin Marian to accompany her to the ice, and be taught to skate ; a merry party they were, and great sport they had.

In the meantime, Mrs. Harrison, who disliked the cold, and remained in the house, tried to amuse herself between her worsted work and some light reading, by sending for Brand half-a-dozen times a day—holding

long colloquies with her, which generally ended with some stricture upon Vera's dress, or housekeeping. It was a great weariness of flesh and spirit to poor Brand, but she had been so long now in Dr. Harrison's family that she could afford not only to bear, but even smile to herself at the high and mighty airs in which Mrs. Harrison indulged, and the little inuendoes which she threw out against her, Brand's, position; such as—"Of course I know, Brand, how trustworthy you are; but still, as a servant, I must tell you I never permit a servant——&c., &c."

And sometimes she invaded the cook's territories, on pretence of showing her how to prepare some receipt; or she would go into Vera's store-room, making impertinent remarks.

"And how you can go for to stand it, Mrs. Brand, is more nor I know," said plain-spoken cook. "All I can say is, I gave her as good as she brought this morning,

and I don't much think she'll trouble me again."

And cook was right ; but then allowances are always made for cooks.

Brand had known Mrs. Harrison a long while, and humoured her, because she was her master's sister-in-law ; but there was one thing that even she did not know how to "stand," and this was, any allusions made to Vera's "ways." She found her young lady, if not perfect, so unlike other people—so much kinder and more thoughtful than they—that she considered her "ways" only called for approbation. But one morning, as Mrs. Harrison sat by the fire in her velvet dress, her feet encased in dainty velvet slippers, and Brand stood beside her, listening to a long talk, the latter part of which had turned upon Vera, she said,

"But, Brand, one thing has given me great anxiety about Vera. I do think she is inclined to flirt, and I know she is very

fond of gentlemen's society. Poor child ! she has no mother ; she has not had the advantages that my girls have."

Now Brand wondered whether Mrs. Harrison objected to any cousinly regard between Vera and Tom and Vincent, or whether she thought Mr. Lane would suit her daughter Marian. They certainly all came home from skating the previous day very rosy, very hungry, talking and laughing much, but she had fancied Vera the quietest of them all. However, she only said,

"Miss Vera has been so brought up with gentlemen, that I don't think, ma'am, she takes more account of them than of ladies."

"Oh ! Brand, I have seen her under circumstances that you have not" (Brand thought she might have said the same) ; and I was only hoping that now, as I hear, she goes so much to Avoncourt, she behaves with propriety, for she must meet a great many people. Does she talk to you of any one she likes or admires ? For it would be

very natural, though I do not myself approve of confidence with servants."

"Sometimes Miss Harrison talks, and sometimes she does not," said Brand, demurely. "I do not think she is very easy to please. I do not hear much of her admiring people; but I should say she was a great favourite at Avoncourt. She and Miss Norreys are hardly ever apart; and as for Sir Bertram——"

"Yes, Sir Bertram," interrupted the lady, who had now arrived at the very point she had been trying to reach.

"Sir Bertram is often here, and great friends with my master, and feels for Miss Vera like a father, or perhaps an uncle," answered Brand, who had no mind to be caught, though she had been on the verge of committing herself. Besides which, she had a very decided opinion of her own as to Sir Bertram; but, as her young lady had never broached the subject from her point of view, she did not like to do so.

The same afternoon, when putting away some collars and cuffs of Vera's, Brand set about "tidying" a drawer in the wardrobe, and in a corner she found a little basket, with one grey glove in it, and the faded magnolia folded in silver paper. Brand did not understand it all, and she certainly did for a moment wonder whether Vera was a flirt, as Mrs. Harrison said. Who had sent the basket and flower she did not know—indeed she had forgotten it, only now remembering that they had arrived the morning of the Avoncourt party. Then she began to think, as she folded ribbons, and paired the gloves, that Vera had not been so gay, nor so childlike, since that day—had even been a little uncertain in temper ; and the woman who could keep such faithful silence sighed as she wondered whether evil days of pain or suspense were in store for her child.

That evening, as Brand stood handing some coffee to Mrs. Harrison and the two

Miss Bells, who were sitting on a sofa in the drawing-room together, she overheard a portion of the conversation in which Miss Bell was entertaining them by some account of the Avoncourt party.

“Sir Bertram was most attentive to everybody, but to Vera his manner was charming. He opened the ball with her; by-the-by, too, he sent her the loveliest bouquet.”

“You should have said that first, sister,” chimes in the younger Miss Bell.

“I assure you, Mrs. Harrison, only that we all know Sir Bertram is not a marrying man, I should have certainly thought his attentions to dear Vera were more marked than usual in our younger days, sister.”

“Yes, my dear; but people are not brought up so particularly as we were. Then our father was a clergyman, so that might account for it—don’t you think so?”

“But, as I was foolish enough to say,” laughed the elder sister, “I should like to have been young again myself, to be

treated with so much courtesy and regard."

"Only, my dear, you would have had to be like Vera, which you never were."

"That is quite true," said the elder sister, rather meekly, for she certainly never had been pretty at all.

"What is that about Vera?" said the girl herself, coming up. "I did not come to ask impertinent questions, however; papa sent me to pray you to come and play at whist."

"In this instance, dear, the listener would have heard some good of herself, contrary to the old adage, for sister was saying I never was as pretty as you are."

"How silly you are, my dear!" said the younger sister. "I never said anything of the sort. Never mind, Vera; we shall be very pleased to play a rubber."

And taking the girl's arm affectionately, the two old ladies crossed the room with her. She set their chairs for them, taking care that one had the footstool she liked,

and the other a screen to protect her from the fire. Vincent looked up from his game at chess with Mr. Lane, and watched his cousin with some surprise, her manner to older people being very gracious.

"Why did you not ask me, Vera? I am ashamed," he said.

"Are you? I am not at all. I like waiting upon people."

"That you do, Vera; sister and I say you are always doing something for somebody—very often for undeserving people, too."

Vera laid her hand across the old lady's mouth.

"Hush!" she said, "or you will make a mistake, and trump papa's best card, and that is a crime he never forgives."

The girl leaned over Miss Bell's chair, watching the game, and surveying her guests. Mrs. Harrison was talking to one of the clergy, and Marian, with some dainty lace-work in her hands, to another. George and Tom, sitting by the piano, one on each

side of a pretty friend of Vera's, whom she had asked because she fancied Tom had admired her on the ice, were entertaining her with stories of Winchester and Woolwich.

She was not wanted anywhere, so she sat down to her writing-table to answer a letter from Miss Norreys, with a volume of Ferguson's "Indian Architecture" beside her. Major Egan had sent her by her uncle all the works that Ferguson had then published concerning India. That country had been an old subject of conversation between the two, and Vera was greatly delighted with these fine works. She was very content now, and had entirely dropped out of the company, feeling as isolated as if no one were in the room but herself. Uncle Frank turned a kind look towards the bent head now and then, but he did not disturb her. Once or twice he heard a soft low sigh. Dr. Harrison, used to his daughter's ways, did not find anything out of the ordinary course of things. She was silent, but that

was always so when many people were present, and would talk ; the moment she was not required she withdrew, she had learned not to try to fill the places of those who really suited her with uncongenial people, and to her impulsive nature silence and isolation were absolutely necessary. But the father remarked the direction of his brother's eyes, and said with a smile of comprehension,

“ Are we to have no music from you to-night, my child ? I have not heard your voice.”

She rose at once and sat down at the piano, engaging her pretty friend and Tom to join her in an old Madrigal, and afterwards in singing “The Chough and Crow,” to the great delight of the old ladies. Presently Mr. Love came to them and sang “The Bell-ringer,” and as the whist-players were counting their losses and winnings, she put Mr. Lane and George through their old favourite show-piece, as they used to call

it when Mr. Lane was their tutor, "The Lord is a man of war."

The party broke up, and all said they had passed a pleasant evening. But when the family were left alone, Captain Harrison put his arm about Vera's neck.

"What were you thinking about, child, alone in that corner?"

"Everyone else was amused but Vera, and you always like to be a little odd, dear, don't you?" said her aunt.

"There was no one to pay her attention, you see," said Marian, who had never much cared for her cousin, and had to-night been a good deal pleased by the conversation and attention of the reverend gentleman who had taken her in to dinner.

Tom looked up with a red flush on his cheek, to answer these asperities in a hasty fashion, but Vera, smiling, said,

"Exactly, there was no one to pay me attention, and as I had something to do that did not require attention from anyone, and

I was not interfering with anyone, I also amused myself."

"Does she not feel, or does she not care?" thought Tom.

His father knew, from the shoulder that trembled under his hand, that she both felt and cared, and would have liked to resent for her these small cruelties ; but he thought, wisely, that her kind and generous heart was its own best protection.

In the meantime she had addressed her father.

"I was writing to Miss Norreys just now, papa, have you any message ? And I was also thinking of something that troubled me to-day. When we were on the ice this afternoon, I heard two farm-labourers who stood by watching us say, ' It's good to be such as them, they've nothing else to do but amuse themselves. The cold that keeps us out of work, finds them fresh amusement. They play half their lives. I often see them at one game and another all the year long. We

go to work day after day, and when we've done at night, we're too tired so much as to read a book, those of us that can read, and we just have to go to bed to get up and work again to-morrow. What has made this terrible difference between men and men?' They said between them words to that effect, papa, and I have just written it to Miss Norreys, for I have been thinking of it all day, and it has made me unhappy. How is it?—how can it be altered?—how can it be made equal for them?"

"One of the great problems of political economy, one of the great problems of life, one of the great secrets known only to the Maker of all things, my Vera, is hardly to be answered here and now ; but this I will say, every extravagance, every act of self-indulgence, every shutting of the eyes and ears to the needs of others, every display of carelessness of their feelings, and the idleness of our own hands, are sins for which we are

answerable before God to this larger class of humanity which He has seen fit to allow."

Vera knew that this was no mere vague expression of opinion on her father's part—he lived the life of self-denial ; and she knew by the tightening of her uncle's hand, and the brightness in his eyes, how deeply he loved and respected his brother. He stooped, and whispered to her, "I know, too, that you follow in his steps."

This was Vera Harrison's life ; this evening was a fair sample of her amusements ; a quiet country life, with certain advantages of competence and leisure. People might call it dull—it was certainly uneventful. She did not call it dull herself ; but, with a naturally gay and emotional character, she was habitually thoughtful and silent. Lately her horizon had been extended by the opening of Avoncourt. Now, through the cold Winter, and under the pressure of little annoyances, the remembrance of Avoncourt, and the hope of Spring, made her glad.

CHAPTER X.

THE old farm had been held by the same family for three generations. It was beautifully situated on the top of rising ground, with an expanse of wood below it; and farther off the windings of the river through the level ground were seen, and the mist and smoke of the town, with occasional glimpses of church-towers and roofs when the weather was clear. The house was not very convenient—indeed, the present occupant often said that now times were changed, he wanted some alterations and improvements made for himself and his young family. The landlord, on the other hand, questioned the propriety of making any such alterations, unless indeed the whole farm-

house were pulled down, and a new one built; to which summary proceeding neither landlord nor tenant was much inclined. The house was very picturesque, with black beams showing out against the plaster, one side of nearly smothered in a great rose-bush, the white flowers delicately tinted with pink, an old-fashioned maiden's blush, and a honeysuckle, that seemed to require trimming and training every week, for it wound its way everywhere—in amongst the very hinges of the lattice windows under their little gables, and hung its branches of sweet blossom into the kitchen-window below. When fair-haired Lucy was at home, she used to say, "She did not know which was which—mother's custards or the honeysuckle flowers." The sweet white roses climbed over Lucy's window; and in the Summer nights, when the casement was wide open, they seemed to keep silent watch over the fair young sleeper within.

So the old house was patched and kept

in order by both landlord and tenant, being beloved by both. It was the oldest house on the estate of the former, and had some curious bits of carving over the wide chimney-piece in the parlour and kitchen; but the latter had been born there himself; and his children also, so that, on the whole, perhaps it was the dearer to *him*.

The farmer, a worthy, honest man, who had had all his education at the parish school, and whose reading did not extend much beyond his Bible and the Gardener's Chronicle, found his pride and pleasure in his daily labour. He was not born to greatness, and did not imagine he should ever achieve any; but he went his daily road, and did his best, eating his bread with thankfulness. If he ever thought there was anything attainable or desirable beyond, he certainly did not think it was meant for him. He was not a man of many words, but he gave sometimes a comical smile or shrug, when he heard of others of his class

who struggled desperately after the things beyond.

The wife he had chosen suited him ; a good-looking cheerful woman, with a helpful hand, a ready smile, a smooth earnest brow, and eyes that had a steadfast gaze. She, too, had her regular occupations, which needed all her care and pains. She had no cause to desire further employment or greater rights ; her work was as legitimate and evident as her husband's ; she was, on that score, as great a power in the household as he was, and no one more readily acknowledged it than he did, but her influence was greater. Her education had been better and wider than his ; her reading, when she managed to find a little time to read, took her into foreign travel, or Scott's poetry, or even Shakespeare's dramas ; her beautiful needlework was a source of refinement to her, and she had a sweet, clear voice and a good ear. Her work was really heavier than her husband's, for it was never

done; as long as she was up, she was at work upon something, whereas he took many a long nap, and was usually in his bed before her. He knew and acknowledged all this, consulting her on every occasion, and she desiring nothing further for herself; yet, from her own exceptional good fortune, she learned how much was needed, and desired better education, suitable employment, and justice in matrimonial and civil questions for most women. She trusted and believed in her quiet steady husband; the sound of his deep, strong voice, and his firm, though rather heavy step, were pleasures to her; but another pleasure rose before her, and she began to believe in another object.

Her two sons were growing up, strong and sunny-haired, grave at their work, like their father, but more impulsive; like herself, with a certain fondness for books, and a more than usual love of nature, and one of them had inherited her gift of song. The

authorities of the neighbouring Cathedral would fain have induced him to join their choir, but his mother was averse to it, dreading evil companionship and a possible vanity ; and so he sang in the congregation of the village for her pleasure and his own, and at home he chanted quaint lullabies to little Lucy, when he would sit on the bench outside during Summer sunsets, and hush the child upon his knee when the mother was too busy to take her.

This little Lucy it was in whom the father's pride and affection were centred, and in whom the mother believed ; her ways were gentle and winning, and she had the wonderful and dangerous gift of beauty. The elder son, Charlie, not clever, but good and hard-working, a born farmer, with all agricultural instincts in full force, found his pleasure in tending Lucy's garden, and training the blush-roses about her window ; and John, who had his mother's good gifts, and might become, if circumstances favoured

him, something beyond a farmer, delighted in teaching the fair-haired girl all he knew, and reading to her the ballads and fairy-tales that had given a colouring to his own fancy.

Watched and tended, cared for early and late, the child began to grow up unlike other children of her class. Visitors to the village-school would ask her name, remarking upon her beauty and refinement of manner, and, those who knew her observed that, without being vain or affected, a certain dreaminess and diffidence increased upon the girl.

Father and mother both anxiously considered what was the best thing for their darling. He thought she read too much and was romantic; she thought she was lonely and wanted companions; and at last they decided on sending her to a boarding-school, in a town at no very great distance. In an evil hour they so resolved; the weaknesses of the girl's character were only deepened—she learned but little. Even

amongst her girl-companions the charm of her beauty held sway, and she lost the judicious training of her mother's daily words and example. When at home for holidays her brothers petted her more than ever, and her father was proud and happy, with his pretty one hanging on his arm, as he walked to church on Sunday.

She had been rarely at "the great house," as the landlord's home was familiarly called, only to an occasional school-treat, and her father's farm, on the furthest border of the estate, though often visited by the landlord, seldom saw any other member of his family. But when Lucy was about sixteen, having walked one day to church with her father, she became aware, during a long sermon, delivered on a hot, dusty afternoon, that two pair of eyes watched her keenly, and they belonged to no less personages than the landlord and his son.

From that day the young master came as often to the farm as his father did ; but so

well did each of them manage matters that they never met all that Summer vacation, when the young man was at home from Oxford. The landlord brought many a gift of fruit and books to the farm, presenting them sometimes to the mother, sometimes to the daughter, and from these simple offerings, as the charm of Lucy's beauty grew upon him, he passed to others which he hoped would be more attractive—a dress or a trinket, but the latter the mother steadily and scrupulously declined. Finding Lucy alone one day, he presented her with a brooch of coral, and made so kind a speech with it, that the young thing did not know how to refuse it; but the mother returned it to him on his next visit to the farm, saying that valuable ornaments were not fit for people in their station of life; and she said it with so calm and unmoved a face that he was almost ashamed of his persistence.

Lucy cared nothing for the master's presents, and was quite ready to let her

mother do with them as she pleased; but she did not tell her of the locket and chain that lay in the small old-fashioned money-box, with chance shillings that brothers or uncles had given her. Her girlish imagination had been touched by "the young master's" dark eyes, and it did not take much time for her to fancy herself deeply in love with the young man, who spent every spare half-hour he could find with her, and treated her with as much deference as if she had been a lady. She was quite wise enough to observe and understand this feature of his acquaintance with her, and it added a greater charm to his society, and vastly increased his success with both herself and her mother. For the mother, who believed in her lovely child, was pleased with the young man who had eyes to see her beauty, and taste to prefer her gentleness; from her he ever found a kindly welcome, and he carefully chose such days and hours for his visits as should not

interfere with her household duties. A little respect and consideration go further than many presents.

By the Winter vacation, time and absence had been doing their work for both, not in bringing change and forgetfulness, but in strengthening their mutual fancy. He compared all the women he met, and to their disadvantage, with gentle, fair-haired Lucy; and she, though silent and retiring at home, could talk much, as many young girls will, to her school-companions. Some of these, less scrupulously brought up than she had been, amused themselves with making Lucy tell over and over again all the details of the little romance in which she was engaged. By one she was encouraged in her girlish fancy, by another her chance of a distinguished marriage was discussed, by all she was envied and exalted into a heroine.

So these two young people met again, ready, from the inadvertence of youth, to suppose each other perfect, and the very

counterpart one of the other. The unworldly mother never dreamed of warning her timid Lucy against "bright particular stars," especially as, with all his kindness and courtesy to themselves, the farmer's family knew perfectly well the infirmity of the young master's temper, so that he was quite as much feared as loved on his father's estates. The servants in a great house are not commonly reticent about their masters' or mistresses' foibles; and the violent temper of both father and son, the passionate scenes of altercation between them, were frequent subjects of conversation in the servants' hall, and amongst the visitors there.

Lucy's vanity was touched, and her ill-trained woman's love of power aroused; she saw the influence she had over the young man, and half intentionally, half heedlessly, she followed the caprice of the moment. He, headstrong and impulsive, grew deeply and passionately in love, and saw the object of his attachment, when, and where, and how

he could, making light of all difficulties, overruling all objections.

The landlord, a man of an old school, lived much at home on his estates, going rarely to London for the season, and preferring to wear his shooting-coat, Winter and Summer, to any other gear; his wife's health not being strong, formed the excuse for having but little company at the Park; but though somewhat out of the gay world from these causes, the young man knew enough of conventionalities and of ordinary life to be aware that romantic attachments like his own rarely ended satisfactorily, had he chosen to consider the matter; but he deliberately shut his eyes.

At Easter he took his degree at Oxford, and the father was immensely proud of a very successful career. An offer was then made him to travel with some relatives, but he could not be induced to leave home. When Summer came, the father, annoyed at his persistent refusal, and at the shallow excuses

made for it, reproached him angrily; and about the same time rumours reached him that his son's visits to the farm were so frequent as to give rise to evil comments.

Fierce and violent were the scenes between father and son, and vain were the intercessions of mother and daughter.

Reports of the storms of rage that took place, the bitter reproaches of the father, the cool defiance of the son, were blown about, and one day the housekeeper, who was a friend of Lucy's mother, knowing that the young girl had some embroidery in hand for her mistress, and would be likely to bring it up to the house, thought it wise to go and warn the mother to keep her at home, and not subject her to the ordeal of appearing at the Park, and being censured there.

"My lady is in tears," pursued the housekeeper, "all day long, and master does not stop at anything when he is enraged. I can assure you none of us have an easy time of

it. But you must understand me, the family are not blaming any of you, or even Lucy, except that the child's too pretty. And really the young master was doing no harm, admiring her a little, and saying a kind word to her; only"—and here she dropped her voice—"the men-servants do say that the old master was 'sweet upon her' himself, and that made him mad to find his son of the same way of thinking as himself, and a likelier man too. Anyway, it can't come to good now, so I would keep Lucy about me, if I were you, as you can't send her off to school again in holidays; and I would let the young man know it is best for both that he should keep away. Now you're not offended with me?—for I acted for the best. There was a dreadful scene last night—the father was shouting with rage, and the son burst out laughing. I sent the butler upstairs, thinking they would come to blows—you know the family has had a bad name for temper, for generations. And the

master was telling his son that he must break off with Lucy—he would not have her brought to shame, nor would he have any such nonsense and philandering with his tenants' daughters; that he owed more respect to his father and mother; that of course it would end badly, for he could not, in his senses, mean to marry her; such a disgrace as a low marriage had never happened in his race."

Such was the information the housekeeper brought to the farm, and she told it with importance and volubility; and Lucy's mother listened with a scared face, for she had never contemplated any consequences so serious; she was frightened for her child's happiness, and for the possible discomforts of the future to the whole family. She put in many an exclamation of surprise and sorrow through the narration, and sat much disturbed, and wiping away a tear or two that fell for her beautiful darling.

Lucy sat within at the window of the

parlour, the door of which opened into the kitchen, and she heard every word. Her vanity was the more gratified, and her foolish, uneducated thoughts reverted at once to the prophecies of her schoolfellows, that this young man would sacrifice position and family affection for a love-marriage with herself.

Her mother talked gravely and affectionately to her, warned her against imprudence, and bade her avoid the headstrong young man ; telling her that of course he did not, could not love her so as to make her his wife, and that she owed to herself, her father, and mother such dignity and self-respect as would prevent his seeking her with other views. And Lucy sat silent and blushing, or answered merely yes and no ; but she said no word of what passed in her own mind. When her father and mother in the evening told her what they wished her to do, and desired her to keep away from the places where she might meet the

young master, she acquiesced ; indeed, for some days she stayed altogether about the house, and when she did wander out, she went into out-of-the-way paths, or at different hours from those in which she had been used to see him. But she had read foolish books, and heard foolish talking, and she persuaded herself more and more that she was deeply in love, and was now living a victim and a martyr to an unfortunate attachment. Her mother was more than usually tender to her, and she took all her petting as her due, but she said nothing, and the mother hoped her child was not made unhappy, and that the whole affair would blow over and be forgotten.

CHAPTER XI.

WHETHER Lucy loved "the young master" or not, is difficult to say ; her mother certainly saw no signs of what she would have considered deep attachment. She fancied herself in love, doubtless, which was sufficient for the time being. And all the Summer days she wandered with her sewing or a story-book, sitting under the shadow of the oaks in the wood, or in the little arbour her brother made for her, all overgrown with honeysuckles and clematis, where her mother would come and bring her some tea and a little hot cake, or some fruit and cream that had been specially set aside for her.

One afternoon, having strolled out further

than usual, and gone into the woods of a neighbouring estate, she sat down on a felled tree beside an old saw-pit, and, tired with her walk and the heat of the day, she remained there till a voice said,

“What are you doing here, Lucy? My God! how I have sought you—wanted you! What has happened to you?—what is wrong?—what have I done, that you fly me?”

She sprang up with a cry when he first spoke, and turned red and pale by turns; and then, in a trembling voice, she said,

“Oh! pray go away! Don’t speak to me! Mother says I am not to see you, or speak to you any more.”

“Does she?” he said. “But what do you say, for I care for that, and not for mother, or anyone else?”

His lips trembled, and his dark face flushed, as he leaned near the girl, who looked nearly as much frightened as she was pleased. He thought her gentleness and

simplicity perfection, so strongly contrasted were they with his imperious temper. Angry with his father's outburst of authority, annoyed that his mother and sister urged upon him compliance with his father's will, he found Lucy sweeter, fairer, more loveable, more dangerous than ever. He set himself to soothe her fears, and as the minutes swept by in her sweet society, he did not stop to remark that it was he only that talked, she giving but shy replies, sometimes but a smile. Her beauty would have graced her anywhere; her submission was peculiarly attractive to his character; so, half from angry self-will, half from passionate inclination, he yielded to the impulse of the moment, and whispered,

"Lucy, do you love me? I love you; and you shall be my wife."

The soft cheek was kissed; the sweet timid lips, as they said "Yes," in almost child-like sounds, were pressed by his; the golden hair was curled by his fingers, and

the head laid against his breast. Why not she as well as another? The hour, the scene all suited. She was fair enough, he knew; good enough, he believed. Why not she, then, as well as another? It was an Idyll, and might have had its place in the old world and the golden age. By-and-by he rose, and said,

“Now we will go home to your mother. She will not refuse you to me. Don’t tremble, little one, it is all right. I am your guardian now. You must never be afraid with me. Nothing can ever reach you but through me.”

The proud, young, boastful heart! How many such speeches have been made!—how bitterly rued!—how cruelly belied! Up to the farm they went, each twined with the other’s arm, chequered with light and shade under the trees, and entered the gate, bathed in the glory of the setting sun. At the porch stood “the old master,” and watched the two figures advancing, uncon-

scious of his presence ; and then, when the young man lifted his eyes and saw his father, he instinctively drew the girl still closer to him, thus to assure her of protection, while the old man pulled fiercely at his grey moustaches, and broke into a low, ironical laugh.

“So this is the way you attend to my wishes, my orders! Fine fooling! You disobedient cur, that should be taught what the lash means! How dare you defy me amongst my own people? I shall have nothing but mutiny to expect when my own son sets the example. I will be obeyed!—you shall attend to my orders, or you shall go elsewhere! You boy! you scoundrel! how dare you stand there with your d—d cool impudence, and face me on my own ground? Down on your knees, and let the girl go, or, by Heaven——” He had lashed himself into that fury that must find vent in words, if in nothing else. He said many other intemperate things, in a storm of rage, intermingling short ironical laughter; and

the young man grew pale, and set his teeth hard, but said nothing. All at once the father turned from his son, and lifting his finger at the girl, who turned red and pale by turns with fright, and who would have gladly escaped into the house, but that the strong arm of her lover held her fast, he said, with a mocking laugh, "And you, you pretty painted piece of flesh, born to be a man's snare, and the rock on which he wrecks himself. That boy beside you does not know your shallow, wavering nature as I know it. You shifting sand-bank, treacherous, on which he must go down, as many a brave ship has been lost on such a thing as you! You Delilah! you piece of harlotry, though you may not know it yet!"

Lividly pale, the son left his hold upon the girl, and stepping forward, struck his father with open hands on his face and breast. With a low cry, the old man reeled back, rather from horror than pain, and struck his shoulder violently against the door-post.

The young man drew Lucy into the house, and kissed her before her mother and brothers, without a word, and strode with long hasty steps down the wood-path to his home. The old man shook off the farmer's kindly hand, and took his way slowly by another path to the great house, clenching his fist at the retreating figure of his son, and muttering low curses against him.

When night had fallen, and the inmates of the farm were sleeping, after sad and painful words amongst them all, and much consideration between father and mother what was best to be done—for though they felt the “young master” had behaved nobly about Lucy, they were quite simple-minded and unworldly enough to believe that his engagement with her would be overruled in some way, and come to nothing—when the whole house was sleeping, Lucy was awakened by the sound of a stone thrown against her window.

“Dress and come down to me, Lucy,”

said the "young master." "Come at once, pet, and don't keep me waiting."

She must either go, or not go, there was no time for hesitation; his will was her law just now, his voice had the only charm for her, and she went. It was just before dawn, and the air was chill, so she took a big wrapping shawl and her hat from the peg behind the door, and with them and her shoes in her hand, she crept down an old back staircase into the wash-house, drew the bolts, and stood in another moment in the open air beside her lover. Neither spoke a word till they were out of sight and sound of the house, and then as they stood hand in hand under the last stars that were paling before the coming dawn, he talked to her long and rapidly.

She was his own, his wife. Some day his father would relent and entreat him to come home—at any rate some day he must die, and then the estate would be his own. He could not stay at home now, just at present

his offence was not to be forgiven ; it was impossible he could remain, but it was equally impossible he should go without her. She must go with him. She would go with him ? His father had hurt his shoulder seriously, his mother had gone from one fit of hysterics into another, his sister wept, but Lucy, Lucy was his own, his darling, she would make amends for all his troubles. She wept, she hesitated, she listened, she agreed, and in half-an-hour she was walking alone to a small station, some few miles off on the road to London. He had given her money and directions, and he had gone himself into the town, where he had sent his groom overnight with his portmanteau to wait his coming ; there he dismissed his servant, bidding him say to all inquiries that he was gone to visit a college friend—mentioning his name. He was in London before Lucy, and waited for her arrival, having made all careful and honourable arrangements for her comfort. When he had settled all busi-

ness matters, he married her, and took her abroad.

At the farm the father and mother did not grow alarmed at her absence until noon ; they thought, as she had put on only her every-day clothes, that she was gone for a long walk, and would return to breakfast ; but when she did not appear at dinner, they grew frightened, and went to the great house, to hear if anything was known of her. The "young master" had left over-night to go and stay in Surrey with some friend, the "old master" and he had quarrelled, they knew, about Lucy, and the servants were not disposed to be very gentle or very communicative to Lucy's mother ; my lady was ill, and her daughter was crying her heart out for father, mother, and brother. So the poor mother went home with her sorrow, to bear it as best she might, until she could consult with her husband what was to be done.

At the Park it never occurred to the

family to suppose the young man would be "such a fool" as to marry Lucy ; he was a young scapegrace, and Lucy was only another soul lost to her parents, lost to her honour. Nothing was done by either family, nothing was known for certain after all possible inquiries had been made. The young man's bankers knew his address, and all his monetary arrangements, but nothing beyond. Grieved at his long absence, cut to the heart by his violence to his father, his mother never recovered from the terrible shock his conduct had caused her ; and after her death, the "old master" lived a hard and gloomy life with his daughter, never asking for, and never forgiving his son. Even on his death-bed he never named him, and though the poor girl sent earnest entreaties to her brother to come home, he was in Egypt, and did not arrive in time to see his father alive.

For a long time Lucy's beauty was a daily joy to her husband, his tenderness and con-

sideration for her were boundless ; nothing she would ask for but he would grant, and for a long time she thought herself blessed. But after a time she wearied ; she cared nothing for, knew nothing of, nature or art or science, as he knew and cared for them. She often wished herself at home at the farm, and thought she preferred the homely ways of her father and brothers to those of this high-bred and educated man. The beautiful flower, wilding though it was, wanted only a little training, a little cultivation, to be perfect ; but that training and cultivation were difficult to give to Lucy. He had loved her as she was, and now he must not wish her different. Soon he found her no companion for his graver hours ; and restless, ill at ease, once more the violent temper, which his first devotion had curbed, asserted itself.

Then she began to fear him, and with fear came cunning and dislike. He had truly loved the woman he believed her to be ;

she had never loved at all, and had simply been the sport of circumstances. Now she was gloomy or captious when he was at home, offended and in tears if he sought the society of his equals in position and education ; she resented his attempts to control her, and resisted his endeavours to improve her. He very often looked at his lovely darling with a sigh, and grew graver and graver, but he would sometimes treat her with all his old fondness, remembering that she had given up all for him ; then he would bring her presents which she liked, or take her out to drive, or to the theatres and public resorts, which she liked still better.

A *mésalliance*, indeed !—not in position so fatally as in the radical peculiarities of temperament.

He found at last that it was useless to try to bring her up to his level—useless to try to amuse himself or her at home. He was too proud to take her into the society to which

he belonged, so he read and thought and wrote more than he used to do, and grew a sad, grave man, hopeless of better days. He had few intimates, and they were Italian. An English traveller would sometimes gain an introduction to him ; but it was at the clubs and cafés alone that he met his acquaintances. Lucy loved the gay world ; to see and to be seen was her delight. She went to opera, concert, and *festa* ; she drove to all public places. Her husband usually attended her, with a stern protest written on his face, unheeded by her. She was very beautiful and much admired, and withal there was the old timid, yielding manner that added to her charms.

One night at the opera she saw a new face, and the eyes of the stranger were constantly directed to her. She blushed, she fluttered under their gaze ; she met him constantly in her drives, wherever she went about the city, and in a few days he had secured an introduction to her husband.

He was an English officer, lounging through Italy on his way to rejoin his regiment in India. He was clever and amusing, he made himself agreeable to both husband and wife, and was ever with them. When the time came for him to proceed on his journey, he had succeeded in persuading them to accompany him as far as Cairo. Lucy was wild with pleasure at the change of scene; she seemed twice herself—always lovely, never tired, and full of interest in everything. Even to her husband she seemed better and brighter, and he let himself hope for happier days. But there was a power at work, of which he suspected nothing. The understanding between Lucy and the new friend was complete. He misstated the date when the steamer by which he was to sail would reach Aden, and assured Lucy's husband that there was plenty of time for him to make an excursion in the neighbourhood, which he had greatly

desired, and be back in time to see him before he sailed.

At the last moment Lucy declined to accompany her husband, at which he was not annoyed or discomposed ; and as soon as he was gone she transferred herself and her wearing apparel to the care of the officer, and went with him in all haste to join the vessel which waited his arrival.

When her husband returned the following day, he found a letter of but few lines from Lucy, telling him the bare fact of the step she had taken, but asking no forgiveness, for, she said, she was tired and unhappy, and he was not very differently minded himself. Her watch and chain, and the rings she had worn—the only trinkets she had taken with her to Egypt—were laid upon his table. Sad !—sad ! Weak, ignorant, and deluded woman ! All wrong from beginning to end—from the pure-hearted mother's blind fondness to the fancied adoration of the unprincipled soldier. Education and

training were wanting—some trifle of learning had been given to the head, but nothing had been done for the heart. A superstructure with no foundation, what could be expected but its fall?

It is no uncommon story—there is no need to dwell further on its details. There were only sorrow and anger, cruelly wounded pride, broken hopes, and ruined lives for Lucy's father and mother, and for her husband. The latter went back again to Italy a sterner and more passionate man, sometimes brooding over his wrecked life, sometimes throwing himself into wild scenes of revelry that brought him neither peace nor rest.

The father and mother did not even know that Lucy had been married; they drooped with grief and shame, and at last gave up the farm and emigrated with their sons. At "the great house" my lady lay ill, and the master was long a sufferer from his shoulder, and no one dared mention the young man's name. As for Lucy, she was but

another girl in the lists of shame, to be named with a smile and a sneer.

Lucy herself, petted and caressed, was bright and smiling, living the life of a bird, thinking only of to-day, heeding not to-morrow. She loved, in her fashion, the man she lived with now ; she ruled him, too, within certain limits, for he was far inferior to her husband in every respect ; he was rich and reckless, and she lived on the flood-tide of fortune. She never thought, never looked back, was troubled by no dreams—that time was not come. Her path was smoothed before her, all pain and anxiety were cleared away ; she was troubled as little as possible by such legal matters as had to be arranged. Her duty was to be lovely and happy, to sing, to smile ; so he was best pleased, and so it best pleased her.

CHAPTER XII.

SCARCELY a cloud ruffled Lucy's life in India, and at last there was talk of the regiment returning home. At home or abroad, it mattered little to her which ; she supposed her life would be ever sunshiny, and that she should be secure from harm or trouble. Her protector was a rich man. He talked sometimes of selling out and living in the country ; and though he never said to her that she should ride the horses of which he spoke, she fancied she should be the companion of all his future life. He never said a word about marrying her, but all her surroundings had been such as to prevent her considering that important. She had been unhappy and weary when married, she was

happy enough now she was not married; she cared nothing for women's society, of men she saw a few, but she loved this one with a kind of blind fidelity.

He was arranging his plans to go home—she was included in them, as she supposed, but one day he roughly undeceived her. From little things he had heard her say, besides knowing that she was devoted to him, he was aware that she considered her lot linked for ever with his; it was of no use to hint at his views and intentions—they must be distinctly expressed. So he began talking carelessly of his return to England, and of how he should pass his time there; if he sold out and took a place in the country, he supposed he had better also take a wife; to settle himself well was the duty of an Englishman; and he mentioned one or more women he had seen, whom he might honour so much as to ask them to share his home. He was sitting beside Lucy, toying with her hair, and stroking her fair cheek.

"The only thing that vexes me," he said, "is what to do with you, pretty one. Tell me what I shall do. I shall often think of you, Lucy, and I daresay miss you also, but what must be, must. You see that, don't you?"

She withdrew with a cold shudder from his caress, and sat silent, staring before her, wide-eyed, as if petrified with horror. He looked at her, touched her, but she did not speak or move; glad to have got so well through a disagreeable task, he took up his cap, and said lightly he had some duty to attend to, and should be back by-and-by.

She sat there brooding, and a deadly passion of revenge and hate came into her mind. He should not do this thing—he should not put her away, worthless and vile, and go to begin a new life.

"He must die!" she muttered, between her closed teeth; "and I?—what matters?"

She had said nothing to him—she could not speak for surprise and passion, but the

resolve of vengeance took instant possession of her. He should die. Cold and pale, with fixed eyes and white lips, she took down a rifle she had often used when out on hunting excursions with him, and slowly loaded it. She was in the act of doing this when he came in hastily for some papers he had forgotten, accompanied by the sergeant of the regiment.

“Loading the old rifle, Lucy? Take care, child, that it does not do you a mischief.”

And with a nod he left her, but there was something in her face, and in the deliberation of her action, that startled even him.

“Egan,” he said suddenly to the sergeant, “I want you to do me a favour. I go this afternoon to stay with —— at his bungalow; find my servant, like a good fellow, and bid him make up a portmanteau for me. She and I have had a quarrel to-day. I daresay it will come right again, but

for the present I don't want to meet her. I wonder if you could get some one to take care of her for a little while ; she shall not want for funds."

Now the sergeant was an Irishman, and therefore by nature tender to women ; and he was a brave man, so that he felt it his duty to protect the oppressed. He, too, had seen something terrible in Lucy's face, and he thought he understood, in part, what had disturbed her. In her happy days, and in her beauty, he had watched and admired her ; she had ever a kind word and smile for others, and in spite of a gentle, timid manner, she had learned from this man she loved perfect courage, so that she had grown dauntless and resolute.

Sergeant Egan executed the commission about the packing of his officer's clothes, but it was not till the next morning that, feeling uneasy about the poor lonely girl, he went to see her. She sat on the floor where he had last seen her, with the rifle across

her knees watching ; and the fixed eyes and pale lips had become more fixed, more pale ; she was now statue-like, and all expression, save one of horror that still remained, had gone out of her face.

The native servants had come and gone, had offered her food, and had tried to move her, but she had not heeded them, or had resisted their attempts.

The sergeant touched her gently, and called her by her name. It might have been the familiar uniform, or the sound of his voice, that roused her. She knew him, and said through parched lips, and in a strange voice, " Sergeant Egan ?—he is gone, then, or dead !" And then her head sank, and she fell forward, an unconscious heap, upon the floor.

Weariness, fasting, anger, and terrible excitement had done their work, and she was very ill. Long she lay between life and death, and during that time the kind-hearted sergeant provided for her necessi-

ties. He placed her with people that cared for her, and restored her to health. The officer who had been her protector endeavoured in vain to persuade the sergeant to let him settle something upon her for life ; he refused all such offers ; and only during her illness would he suffer him to do anything for her.

When the regiment sailed for England, Sergeant Egan retired, and took his pension ; and after a little time he induced the feeble, shaken woman to become his wife. He told her that it would be to his advantage, that he would never forsake her, and therefore, as his wife, she would be less expensive to him. He made the most of all such considerations, that he might give her the invaluable pleasure of being generous.

Sad, and hopeless, and listless, she let him have his way, and he dashed away the tears from his grey eyes, and thanked her from his noble heart ; for he had learned to love the poor forlorn creature so utterly depend-

dent on his goodness, as, however strange it may seem, the mother often loves best the child that causes her most trouble ; as a man loves the other whom he has rescued from drowning ; as—ah ! dare such a comparison be made?—as Christ pitied and forgave—pattern for the whole world. Without knowing it, and how often without considering it, do people look on at the noblest deeds, and forget the Spirit of God that has inspired them, and the Christ in imitation of whom they have been done.

As Robert Browning says, with wonderful force—

“ I think this is the authentic sign and seal
Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,
And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts
Into a rage to suffer for mankind,
And re-commence at sorrow.”

Michael Egan sailed with his wife for America, where he had relations ; and when the war broke out between the North and South, he offered his services to the Federal Government, who were too glad to admit

him into their army, in whose ranks he soon distinguished himself. After he had been made colonel, he was wounded, and sent home, after the battle of Bull's-run, invalided.

Lucy recovered health and strength, but her beauty was faded, and her gaiety was gone. Gravely, and with a certain sadness, she struggled to fulfil her lot in life. Sometimes oppressed by the sense of obligation under which she lay to him, she would lean against her husband's shoulder, and burst into low weeping; and when he asked tenderly what ailed her, she would answer,

"I have spoiled your life—you might have been a happier man. You sacrificed yourself to me."

"Nonsense! I have never been happy till now. Only your unhappiness can grieve me. Be you happy. The best return you can give me for what you call my sacrifice is to smile. And as for ruining me, why, I am just beginning to get on—my luck came with you, darling."

She would creep away to weep by herself, for time had brought her thought, and sorrow, and regret. Her children, though a great source of delight to their father, brought none to her. She was good to them, studious of their welfare ; but the lines of care deepened about her mouth and brows with their growth, and she smiled less and less as the years rolled on. Never hard to others, she was a tyrant to herself, and looked upon every fresh trial that came upon her with a bitterness that sprang from remorse.

There was entire confidence between her husband and herself ; no point of her early life had she concealed from him ; there was no fear mingling with her present sorrows. From his kindly heart he pitied her, and strove now with all his might to strengthen her weaker nature. He would fain have had her forget all the past, and live again for him an entirely new and different life ; but he found the iron had entered too

deeply into her soul, and the awakening from her thoughtless frivolity had been too sudden and bitter not to have left her scathed and blighted. So, with his eager, sanguine temperament and affectionate nature, he made the best of what she was, and took upon himself to fill up all the vacancies she left. If she was silent, he talked ; if she seemed weary of the children, he amused them ; if health and strength failed her, he supported her ; and yet his unselfish devotion increased her pangs of remorse. But he never tired ; so wonderful and perfect was his affection that he loved the woman she was, and not that which she might have been.

The life in America suited them both ; the relatives he had there had gone out poor people, and were doing well, but were so fully occupied in their own affairs as not to interfere with theirs. She was still fair and graceful enough to win admiration ; her proud, cold manner forbade too near inti-

macy, and her tall, hot-tempered husband gratified all her wishes.

Lucy was a true and faithful wife to him, and he left nothing undone that could conduce to her comfort and advantage. With more forethought than usually belongs to his race, he made provision for her in case of his death. He obtained all the information he could about her former friends in England, and told her gently of the giving up of the farm, and the sailing of her family to Australia. She bent her head, and twisted her hands tightly in her lap, but she said nothing, and he suffered as much in having to tell the story as she did in hearing it. Of her first husband he could learn only that mother and father were dead, and that he had come into his inheritance, but that he left it desolate.

And of the other man—for many months that was the one mistake Colonel Egan made. He had never asked news of him, because he feared to name him to her.

Lucy had loved him ; she had never felt herself his inferior in any respect ; he had never put her to shame. Many a time she had helped him, and nursed him, and prevented his committing follies or indiscretions. Lucy had loved him after her fashion ; she no longer hated his cold-blooded, selfish forsaking of her, and it was of him she pined to hear.

One day, reading some paper, she came upon the same name, and laying her finger upon the word, she said, in a low voice, and with averted face—

“ I wonder what has become of him ?—I should like to know.”

Then he made inquiries for her, and after he had returned home invalided, he received the news that the officer about whom he asked had lived a club-life in London, fished in Scotland, travelled in Switzerland, passed an idle life of amusement, and had caught fever and died. Then Lucy rested, and devoted herself with singleness of heart

to the generous man who had saved her. But all her care was vain; he had gone through too many hardships in the late war—had too severely tried his constitution—and he never recovered from his wound.

During his last days he talked to her of his own childhood, and the brother with whom he had played. To that brother's care he committed her and his children, writing a letter to be delivered to him by Lucy herself, and almost his last words were—

“You will go to James soon, darling. Tell him how I loved you. James is a fine fellow, and a Major in the English Army—a cleverer fellow than I. You will go to James?” And when she promised him, weeping, the gallant, tender spirit troubled itself no more about things of this world.

CHAPTER XIII.

PLOUGHING home through a heavy sea, driving before a gusty wind, came the steamer *Minnesota*, from New York to Southampton ; and on the deck, watching the waves curling over, and throwing off sheets of spray as the bows struck and cut through them, sat a pale woman. Each day that it had been possible for her to do so she had sat thus, speaking rarely, and having no acquaintance with those on board. She had two children with her, who might be her own, for they called her mother, but in no other way, in no likeness to herself, in no fond affection between them, did they appear to belong to her ; when they were with her she seemed more silent than

usual, more pale and anxious, and the lines visibly deepened in her brows; only when she was alone did her tense face relax, and there came over her a settled calm. She was never unkind to the children, nor did she speak harshly to them; she seemed ever actuated towards them by a stern sense of duty, and to herself alone was she severe and cruel; with a bitter cynicism she laughed—never smiled—at any inconvenience, or disappointment, or *contretemps* that happened to herself, as if it were the normal state of things, or one that even called for mirth. Only when she sat alone as now, uncared-for and unwatched, did the face relax into a faint shadow of what might have been that of a fair woman. Now, as she sat nearing England hour by hour, after a rather long and stormy passage, there was no pleasure or pain, no hope or despair, not even expectation, only a dull, indifferent waiting for the unavoidable; and of that she sat and thought cheerlessly, but incessantly, turning

it, as it were, from side to side, to view it from every point ; and the view was never apparently a satisfactory one, for she seemed to gather sadness, weariness, and gloom as the days went by.

The captain passed her as she sat idle and watching ; he had compassion on her in his rough, honest soul.

“ It has been a nasty passage for you and the young ones, ma’am,” he said, stopping by her side ; “ but I hope now in two days’ time we shall make the Channel, and by the third day be in Southampton.”

“ Yes,” she answered, drearily, in a half-questioning tone. “ Thank you,” she added, after a moment.

“ You’ll be glad to touch dry land again, I’m thinking. The lads will anyway, bless ’em !”

“ Glad ?” she repeated, in the same questioning voice, and then she dropped her head.

“ Pray, ma’am,” said the soft-hearted

sailor again, "have you any friends to meet you on landing, or can I be of any use to you? You are not over-well, or fit to struggle with the land folk—sea folk aren't half so bad, to my fancy."

She opened her blue eyes wide, and gasped out—

"Will you kill me with your kindness? I can bear hard words, and a hard world now, but kind ones are too much. I have no friends. Will you leave me?"

For a moment the captain felt inclined to take her at her word, with a sharp saying or two, but the goodness of his heart got the better of him; he was a big, strong man, what were wind and weather to him?—what a rough speech or a heavy blow?—his frame was powerful and his aim steady; and she a frail, delicate thing, by virtue of her mere sex to be tenderly used, and her shrewishness forgiven. He laid his hand on her.

"Poor lass," he said, "no friends! then

your enemies, whoever they were, have a deal to answer for. I know more about things than many people suppose ; you were a pretty, gentle creature once, I know. No matter, I like you as you are ; you are world-worn, as one may say, and I am weather-worn. I'm not going to worry you any more, but if ever you want a man to stand by you, or a place where you can come to, to be your own mistress for a bit, I will do what I may for you and the lads. See here," he took a little book from his pocket, tore out a leaf, wrote on it his name and address in Southampton, and put it into one passive hand that lay upon her knee, pressing the hand as he did so.

She did not stir, nor return the pressure, but she lifted her face and eyes to him with the appealing look of an animal ; as his heavy step passed beyond her, the blue eyes filled with tears and overflowed. Afterwards, for the few days that remained of the voyage, she would flush when the captain

came near her, but would hang her head and keep silence. When the ship came into port he pressed her hand and said,

“Remember my promise to you.”

And she said low and falteringly,

“God bless you !”

She remained two days in Southampton, to rest one of the boys, who was a delicate child, and made various inquiries about places and people in England. She obtained the use of an army-list, and a gazeteer of English counties ; she also read the papers, and made many notes of names, addresses, and distances in her pocket-book ; she answered an advertisement of some quiet lodgings to let at Hampstead, thinking that the open air would be better for the boys than a close London street ; she had never seen Hampstead, but had heard there was a heath there, and supposed it would be like other wild places that she had seen in her eventful life. She presented herself and her children at these lodgings the day after her

letter had reached them, and engaged them at once.

Here was at least entire change and rest for a time ; the children were pleased, and their shy, pensive ways rather attracted the landlady, who had a horror of " rough, tearing boys." No one knew her, no one interfered ; she was free to come and go, and occupy herself in her own way. She was rarely idle, she worked well and carefully for her boys, they read to her every day as she sat at her needlework, they wrote, they worked their simple sums. She paid her debts regularly, but she said nothing, and at night, when the children were asleep, she would sit alone with her head leaning on her hand, with a few papers and letters before her, which she studied, but each night they were put away, and nothing came of the study. To her landlady she was civil, but never spoke if she could avoid it ; and that worthy woman would probably have long before wearied of her, had it not been for

the boys, whom she, childless and a widow, would coax into her parlour, warmer and brighter than their own, and feed them with cake and apples, or set them to play with the tortoiseshell cat, and whistle to the canary.

The mother and boys had come over from America in February; the Summer and Autumn had passed by, and they were still at Hampstead. The boys looked stronger and better for English air and living, and they laughed and played when away from their mother; they were not afraid of her, only they held her in a kind of awe, her silence and gravity were to them such a mystery. Month by month she had counted her store of ready money, as if to see how long it would hold out. About Christmas she wrote a letter, but destroyed it—two more shared the same fate; she had never received one. The New Year of 186— had passed, she had been in London nearly a year. One evening the landlady heard her walking up and down the room with

hasty steps. What was her trouble? she wondered; then listening eagerly, she thought she heard her sob; on some pretence she went into her room; no, she was not weeping certainly, but looked paler, sterner than usual. •

“I am going to London to-morrow,” she said, coldly—“at least, I think so. Will you kindly take charge of the children for me till my return? You will greatly oblige me.”

The landlady merely expressed her acquiescence, for she knew that nothing more was to be said to this stony person; indeed, she was always uncomfortable in her presence, so she left, wishing her good night.

“I never know,” said the landlady to herself, “whether to pity her, or to ask her to suit herself elsewhere. It is so awkward not to know how to treat folks.”

The stranger did go to London the next day; she carried in her hands a parcel that looked like folded papers. She was

dressed in the garments she usually wore on Sundays—a plain black silk dress, a black cloth jacket, and a black straw bonnet, trimmed with velvet, very quiet and unobtrusive, but such as a lady might have worn. As she put on her gloves, she looked for a moment at her reflection in the glass, and lifted her eyebrows.

“I was pretty once,” she said in herself, “and now! How one would like to know beforehand the effect one will produce upon others, and how much more to foresee what the end of a life like mine will be—a life full of strange chances! I wonder what he is like! I wish to Heaven it had not been necessary to go to him; but I know nothing of business, and something must be done for the boys—poor Michael!”

She put her face quite close to the glass, and smoothed her hair, muttering,

“Golden once, now how nearly grey! No matter—I, for one, would not live my life again.”

She kissed her boys before she went; they looked at her with a pleasurable surprise. They would kiss her, and she expected their kiss, but she rarely kissed them in return, and never before could they remember her having volunteered to do so.

"Bring us something from London, mother," said the younger boy.

"What! James—have you not things enough?"

"Oh! yes," he said, abashed; "but everything comes from London, does it not? I should like a thing that I *knew* came from there."

"Very well, I will see," she said, in a gentler mood than usual.

She went away quietly and rather shyly, but, by the time she had reached the bottom of Regent Street, the stern, fixed look had returned to her face, and she raised her head, not in pride, but in defiance. She slowly entered the Junior United Service Club, and asked of the hall-porter if Major

Egan was there, and, if not, where she should find him. She proceeded to his address in Suffolk Street ; he was at home.

“ Can I see him ? ” she said.

“ I will inquire. What name shall I say ? ” asked the servant.

“ Say a person—a woman wishes to speak to him.”

The servant stared and went. She was used to *his* ways, and knew that he would not refuse to see the poorest creature. But this woman—was she a lady ?—ought to have given her name in all courtesy, or ordinary worldly propriety.

His room was very orderly. A large book-case, well-filled, occupied one side of it, two or three fine proof-engravings hung on the walls, a carriage-clock was on the mantelpiece, with two exquisite French bronzes, and some trifles in mosaic from Rome and Florence. On a side-table, covered with papers, written and printed, pamphlets, and writing materials, stood a

tazza of Algerine marble. On the centre-table, at which he was sitting, stood a reading-lamp, ready for lighting, and the *Times* of the day; the *Spectator* of the week lay there; the open book, too, which he had been reading, and which he laid down as she entered. He rose from his easy-chair and bowed to her; to him she was simply a stranger and a woman, and therefore received his courtesy, but he was indifferent as to who the stranger might be. But she, on the other hand, surveyed him curiously, and rapidly gathered her conclusions respecting his mind and character, and they were tolerably correct. She slightly returned his bow, and then waited in some embarrassment till he spoke.

"I have never seen you before, I think. Will you tell me what I can do for you? Will you sit down?"

She seated herself in a low chair that he pulled forward, and waited a moment before she spoke; and then, in a very low but clear

voice, speaking slowly, and with difficulty, she said,

“I was the wife of Michael Egan, your brother. Will you read this, his letter, first? I will answer any questions you may wish to put afterwards. He died fifteen or sixteen months ago. He was badly wounded at Bull’s-run, and had not strength to recover. I am his widow, and I have two sons. I have some little means. I did not come to you to beg, but I have no knowledge of business. I must have consulted some man—it was better to come to you first. I know little of such things, but I have heard of family pride; my sons are your nephews, you might object to the circumscribed position that alone I should be able to give them. My husband bade me come to you, but could I have depended on my own judgment, I should not have come. I have now been in England a year, and have been living at Hampstead, upon the small stock of ready money that I brought over with me.

There is some property in America, that must be dealt with for the boys."

His face changed but little as she spoke ; he listened attentively, and when she ceased he inclined his head in grave assent, and then said,

"I think you have judged kindly and wisely."

He opened his brother's letter, which ran as follows :—

"DEAR JAMES,—This letter I am writing as a kind of precaution, though they say there is no immediate fear of my death. My papers, and a little picture of me, will be put into your hands by Lucy, my wife. It is on her account, and the boys', that I write to trouble you, for you must pretty nearly have forgotten me. Two or three letters only have passed between us since you sailed for India. After they made a gentleman of you, I did not think you would care to hear much of your serjeant brother ; not, James,

that you were ever set up, but, as you and I have learned in India, caste is caste, and yours is better than mine now, as, indeed, you deserve it should be; but it would ill beseem me, your brother, to lower you in the sight of your friends. You were always more studious than I, James, and you behaved better, and chose your friends better; but I tried to do what was right, and in late years I have been very fortunate. My luck came to me with Lucy, I think, God bless her! I was never much afraid of anything, and I went at the slavery fellows with a will, and they gave me my captaincy at starting; now they call me Colonel, and I have got some honour by the wounds of which I am sick. Somehow I think that I may die; I feel as if my work were done, and I had a right to go. Lucy has a little money, and I suppose these Federals will give her a pension, but I tell her she had best go home, because of the boys. You will be good to her and them, James, for the sake of the

old father and mother, and the days in Meath before we 'listed!

"Lucy will tell you all you want to know, I had rather not write it all, her life and mine, and I would fain ask you not to ask her anything—her life has been a strange one, poor girl!—only she would not be happy not to tell you all. If I get well all this does not matter; but if not, why, you will see what is best to be done. I cannot rule any further. Farewell, and God bless you all.

"Your affectionate brother,

"MICHAEL EGAN."

There were other papers and unfinished letters in the packet over which Major Egan glanced. The letter he had read he held tightly clenched in his hand.

"Poor Michael!" he said at last. "So he died! We were boys together. I have not seen him for twenty years or more. I knew him so little that I cannot weep for

him. You are not offended? I heard of his fame in America, and knew his name there well. I also saw his death recorded, but I did not know he was married. So Michael loved you, and you are my sister?" She started violently, and drew her chair further from him. "My sister," he said, with infinite gentleness, and looking at her earnestly, "can you trust me, do you think?" She bowed her head. "If you can, it will be best and safest that you should tell me all; if not, then I will work for you in the dark as well as I can. I shall leave it to yourself; I will never press you on the matter. My sister," he said again, after a minute's pause, "whatever of good or evil you may tell me, that title still is yours. I will endeavour to fulfil my part." He held out his hand to her; she laid her own in it.

"I will trust you," she said. "Listen."

CHAPTER XIV.

“ I WILL tell you, as well as I can, and as much as I can and dare. Do not be very hard on me ; not that anything matters much now, so that the boys are not involved in their mother’s misdeeds. I have no friends, fortunately, and, as I believe, no relations, so that my difficulties are less than they might otherwise be. I will tell you, too, as quickly as I can, for I fancy I need not supply details ; the outline will be sufficient. By-and-by, if you see more of me, and want to hear all particulars about your brother, I can enter into those details.”

He did not attempt to interrupt her, but listened patiently and thoughtfully to the sad and eventful story she told him. It

was a very strange one, but he believed her, and his face changed from time to time as she spoke, though its most constant expression was one of intense pity.

She spoke in a low and monotonous tone ; her manner was as unheeding as if she were telling the story of another, and as if she had learned the whole to tell it in this fashion. When she ceased speaking, she sat with her hands loosely folded in her lap, and her eyes bent upon the ground. She had done what she came to do, and it was for her hearer to speak now. She looked wearied, even aged, after she had ended her recital, and they were both silent for some time.

Presently he rose and rang the bell ; she took it for a sign of dismissal, and prepared to leave him.

“Thank you for hearing me patiently,” she said. “You will perhaps think over the matter, and let me hear what is best to do for the boys. When arrangements are

made for them, I shall be able, I hope, to find some means of self-support. No one knows me; I shall, therefore, not cause you annoyance in whatever way I may be occupied. I have but one thing to ask—that I may be allowed to see the boys sometimes, if it can be managed without trouble to you. Thank you once more, and good morning.”

She bowed, and was about to withdraw, when the servant entered to answer the bell.

“Bring some wine for this lady,” he said; and then, turning to his visitor, “You are not in haste to go, are you? I have much to ask—much to say. It would hardly be carrying out Michael Egan’s wishes for you to run away from his brother as soon as you have found him.”

He made her drink some wine when it was brought. He tried in a thousand little ways to win the trust of the now shy and suffering woman.

“I am very glad you have told me all,

and truly glad that Michael always knew. I am so sorry for you—deeply sorry. You must have suffered greatly.”

She looked up at him with such appealing eyes.

“For God’s sake, don’t speak kindly to me! I can bear it least of all from you. I have so used myself to know that I had forfeited everything, that even in America, where no one could know of me, I lived a life apart. I have met with a good deal of dislike, and I can bear that. I should not have come to you now, if I could have arranged for the children myself.”

“Had you not come,” he interrupted, “you would have deprived me of a duty and a pleasure. I want to see my nephews. I am alone. I am alone in the world, and will do my best for you and them.”

“Why are you so much alone?—you deserve, I fancy, every happiness, if, indeed, a home, which is, I suppose, the word for not being alone, be counted as happiness.

Perhaps, though, I should give no opinion. Who is that?" she said, pointing to an oil-painting of a girl which hung over the chimney-piece.

He smiled, and a little colour came into his face.

"That is the niece of a great friend of mine. He was kind enough to give me that picture at Christmas. She is very good and gentle."

"I beg your pardon for asking about her. I have no right to speak of good and gentle women," she answered humbly.

"Vera Harrison is the last woman in the world to draw unkind distinctions," he said, warmly; and then added, "Let the past be, Lucy. I do not wish to form hasty conclusions. I wish to judge you patiently, and after long acquaintance, for your sake as well as mine. But as far as I can judge, now, I believe you were true to my brother, and tried to do your duty to him. I will take my stand there. There are few of us

who could dare to lay open their whole life as perfect and stainless. I shall never refer to this story you have told me, and will do my best to keep you safe—as far as possible happy. You have your children to consider now ; a mother will be perfect for her sons. Doubtless they respect and love you.”

“ No,” she said, with drooping head, “ they do not love me ; how, indeed, should they love one so lost, so broken as I ? ”

“ Hush ! Try from this time to make them love you. I feel sure you are just to them. Try now to be kind. They will be happier, and so will you.”

“ But——”

“ I will hear no ‘ buts. ’ Do you know that such despair, despair of God’s grace and help, is rebellion against him and a sin ? ”

“ My life has been all sin, I think ; one long sin from the first hours of my girlhood, when I used to wait in a flutter of vanity at my father’s door for the tall young master, and be more anxious to hear

him praise my green stuff gown and the pink ribbon in my hair than to help my mother in her many household cares. If I could make you understand how full my life is now of remorse, how utterly I have lost all self-esteem, how lonely and desolate I am, and how deeply I feel that I have deserved it all!"

"I can never wipe out the past for you—I can never give you back one hour of your simple, guileless youth, neither can I promise you anything in the future, save my untiring support, and the certainty of peace. Shall you think me a canting hypocrite, Lucy, for talking thus to you? You must not. I will never tell you anything but what I believe to be true; but if you dislike it, I need not go into these things. For the present, at any rate, we will not discuss them. You will leave me these papers to look over at my leisure?—and now, if you have no objection, I should like to go down and see the boys."

She coloured a little, and hung her head, but it was with a feeling of shyness to which she had been long unused, the shyness produced by gratification.

“Leave as much as you can to me,” he said; “of course always expressing your own wishes. Many things will come right, and I will steer you clear of difficulties. You must try to believe an unexciting, uneventful life to be the best for you. You will find it strange at first.”

“I suppose it will be very dull, but I shall get used to it; and with this changed, hard face, what brightness can I expect? You will say that is vanity—perhaps it is. But what else has my whole life been but vanity? Protected from labour, from sorrow, from want, expected to be gay and light-hearted, the foam and froth of my character brought out in every way, every bit of trouble and business smoothed out of my path, all the horrid legal matters that at one time came upon me, settled, I never exactly knew

how; and the only thing required of me was to be bright as a flower, a sunbeam—gay as a butterfly, a bird. After I married Michael, the flower drooped, and the bird sang no more. I once used to say respectability did not suit me; now, I suppose, retribution has fallen on me.”

He had been moving about his room, locking up papers, closing his books, and leaving everything arranged in his orderly fashion.

“I am ready,” he said at last. “Shall we go? But it is late; and your boys dine early, I daresay. You must have some luncheon before you go home.”

He took her into St. James’s Hall, and ordered one or two little dishes that he thought might tempt her appetite. He also ate himself at this unusual hour, that she might not feel she had troubled him.

“And now, Lucy, is there anything you want for the boys? Let me have the pleasure of taking it to them.”

Then she remembered her younger child's request, and told it to her companion, who at once proceeded to comply with it, for he went into Cremer's shop, and selected bats and balls, and tops enough to gladden any little lad's heart who had not been overburdened with this world's delights; and so formidable a bulk did the heap assume that, after all, it was impossible for him to take them with him to Hampstead. She watched him quietly, neither suggesting nor disclaiming anything, as if she had no concern in the matter. Certainly he did not consult her, but that was because he felt she would beg him to do no more, with the sad, shy look he could not bear to see. He did not attempt to get anything for her—the time for that had not come; and she understood him perfectly, and was comparing in her own mind the similarity of character between Michael, her husband, and his brother James. There was the same open hand, the same generosity and forbearance, but

there had been more dash in Michael; in James there was more gravity, besides the unmistakable refinement of a gentleman living amongst gentlemen.

The early darkness was already beginning to fall when they reached Hampstead; and the lights were shining here and there in the closely-pressed shops along the old-fashioned street. The sun was setting dark red behind Harrow, and the air was very keen. Mrs. Egan was tired, both in mind and body, and, in spite of the friend and protector she had found, she felt desolate and cast down when she reached the door of the place she called "home." Now that the feeling of defiance, on which she had supported her drooping heart, was of no further use to her, her spirits sank entirely, and had she dared to give way, she could have wept, when, in answer to her knock, the little maid, a child of about fourteen, appeared. As Mrs. Egan and her companion entered the narrow passage, the

landlady opened the parlour-door, from which issued a broad stream of red firelight, and a babble of young voices. Looking out into the passage, she saw her lodger, and disregarding the person who accompanied her, she said in a loud whisper,

“Lor’, ma’am, I’m half sorry you’ve come back so soon ! The dear little fellows has been along with me all day, and I was just going to get them some tea ; they’d like some muffins, I was thinking—most boys do. But just you come and look at ’em. They’ve been that good to-day, you don’t know.”

“I have a gentleman with me,” Mrs. Egan answered coldly ; “he wishes to see the boys ; he is their uncle,” and she was about to pass into her own sitting-room, to the extreme disgust of worthy Mrs. Tanner, but the Major said,

“Oh ! Lucy, let us go and see the boys where they are. I would rather, if you do not mind.”

So they went to the open door of the

parlour, to see a table and floor littered with books and pictures, a big tortoiseshell cat seated on the table, winking and blinking in the strong glare of the fire, and two boys playing at an old bagatelle board—pussy having been installed on the table to be hugged and stroked in the intervals of play, and to be appealed to on all occasions when the question of fair play arose. Mrs. Tanner's work lay in her arm-chair, a copper kettle was singing on the fire, and the pile of muffins to which she had referred stood on the top of a corner cupboard.

The first thing the mother remarked was that the boys looked happy. The first thing the uncle observed was the intelligent faces and the scrupulous neatness of their appearance. They soon perceived they were not alone, and looked up in surprise, blushing.

"So one of you youngsters asked your mother to bring you something from London," said Major Egan, smiling, as he went up to the table; "you don't seem to want for

toys, and she has brought you me. What do you say to that?"

"You are too old to play," said James, the younger boy; "but," he added, looking intently at the empty sleeve, "I think you are a soldier. Father was a soldier too."

"Are you a soldier, sir?" asked Feargus, the elder boy, coming forward.

"Yes, I am; and I am your uncle."

"I think I like you better than any other present mother could have brought me from London," said little James timidly, leaning against the Major's leg.

"That is right. I hope you will be great friends with me soon. I am going to stay and drink tea with your mother this evening, if she will let me, so you come and talk to me whilst she is taking off her bonnet. She is tired too, are you not, Lucy?"

She fled from the room, that she might weep unobserved.

"He will kill me, if he is so considerate," she said to herself.

But she was wrong ; true kindness that is well placed does not kill, it is a libel to believe it.

Mrs. Tanner was already sufficiently interested in the boys to forgive the coldness and silence of their mother ; and now, when a "real gentleman" appeared and claimed relationship with her lodgers, she was ready to do all in her power to make things comfortable, as she called it. She set her best tea-things in the parlour, after having put on her Sunday gown, taking a long time to do it, that she might remunerate her attentions by hearing as much as possible of the chat going on between the uncle and nephews. The boys were quite old enough to remember their father, and many details of their life in America.

By-and-by, when her preparations were ready, Mrs. Tanner went upstairs to Mrs. Egan, to offer her some little service.

"I have made bold, ma'am," she said, "seeing you was tired, and him quite a

gentleman, to do things as I think you would like them done. There's a nice tender steak, and some water-cresses; and over and above the tea, I've put a bottle of Bass and a bottle of sherry on the table ; some gentlemen don't care for tea."

"You are very kind," said the poor woman, looking up with eyes still red from weeping, though she had bathed them assiduously. "I will come down directly."

"The gentleman is talking quite happy with the boys ; I don't think he'll be very difficult to please. And don't you take on—things will all come right, only give 'em time. Time's the secret, I always think."

"Major Egan is very kind. I am his brother's widow, you know ; we have had many sorrowful things to talk of to-day, and I am over-tired."

"No doubt you are, ma'am, and I'm just hindering you. Now, only to think," said Mrs. Tanner to herself, as she left the room, and walked rather heavily downstairs—

“only to think of his being a real gentleman, and a Major!—lost his arm in battle, a-fighting for the Queen, no doubt! I always did like soldiers myself, and truly glad I am I was civil and attentive to her. I wonder what she was doing, though, all these months alone? Ah! but I daresay he was not in London—these soldiers have lots of friends, and he was staying with some one or other. Bless the boys! how they are laughing!—it just does me good to hear ’em. She’s sad enough, poor thing! And now I’ll go and dish the steak; and I hope they’ll like it, for it was a beauty!”

CHAPTER XV.

“**T**HE boys are nice little fellows, Lucy,” Major Egan said, when he left the cottage on the heath that night. “I do not think there will be any cause for anxiety about them. I will look over my brother’s papers, and see what income there is for you all. I shall be able to add something to it, and looking after your interests will give me an object in life beyond my books. I see from your face that I must not delay matters—you do not like suspense. I have an idea already, but it is of no use being in a hurry, and then having to step back again. Do you care where you live? If not, I fancy your best course will be to live in some town where there is a good school for the

boys ; they will live at home then, and you will be less lonely."

"But I ought to do something for myself. I have no right to take advantage of your bounty. I thought, if you would see to the boys, there might be money enough to secure them a fair education ; and I would advertise for some situation—a housekeeper, or even a nurse, needlework does not really pay."

"I doubt very much whether you are fit to take any situation. I do not mean it unkindly, but it requires some care to know how to obey, as well as how to rule ; and you have been used all your life to ruling, more or less. Do you think you could forget your training, and learn to submit all at once? You would find it more difficult than you suppose, and you would have to take into consideration the fact that those who might be your rulers might not be the best and kindest of people. Be a little patient, and trust me to do the best for you."

“I do trust you ; but it grieves me to think I must be thrown upon your generosity. I who have no claim, and no deserving ;” the tears stood in her eyes as she spoke.

“You are proud, Lucy, in your very humility—but so am I ; and, if I can prevent it, my brother’s wife shall not earn a precarious livelihood at the mercy of other people’s caprices. You may not care whether your sons are gentlemen or not, so that they are good, and can have education enough to earn their bread honestly ; but I have no children, am never likely to marry, and I should like to give them a chance of rising in the world. I could, perhaps, explain to you more fully some other time that it is almost a duty to give them this chance. Why, in after-life, should they regret their loss, and blame my neglect ? For your boys’ sakes, too, you must be prudent in what you do. I do not say that society is a good thing, but I do say that

we find ourselves in the midst of it, and whether we like it or not, we must more or less conform to its usages and requirements. We have the means to fit these lads to take any reasonable place in the world; when they are old enough to judge, they can please themselves as to how much they may desire to see of it. You are tolerably comfortable here for the present, are you not? Your old landlady seems anxious to please you."

"Oh, yes; she was very good before, but now that I have got a friend—a man with moustaches and——"

"And only one arm," said the Major, laughing.

"And an officer, I was going to say, I have no doubt she will be very attentive. She could not quite understand me, and she did not like my never talking to her about my own affairs. I have seen people like that before. Why is it?—why are people so inquisitive about their neighbours?"

"It is a sort of ignorance; they have usually little or nothing to do with their minds."

"But I am ignorant too—I never was curious."

"You!—but if you were ignorant in some ways, you have had much experience, and have much knowledge of the world. Poor Lucy! inquisitive people must be a terrible bore to you."

"You are very good to me," she said, hanging her head; "you take the trouble to listen to and answer all my silly speeches."

"Good night," he answered. "I shall be down in a day or two."

She sat alone over her fire for a little while thinking. What an eventful day it had been to her! but probably the last truly eventful one she should ever pass in her life; and she stood, as it were, shivering on the brink of an unknown future, that belonged more to her sons than to herself. She thought over every act and word

of the day, and suddenly she dropped her face between her hands, blushing deeply.

"I told him all," she thought—"everything except two names—all the terrible story of my life. I shall never dare to face him again. But he does not hate me. If anything could give me confidence to try to redeem the past, his goodness and gravity could. I never saw so grave a face and manner, such dignity and self-respect. No one would dare be impertinent to him. His sister, he calls me. They had no sister. I wonder if he ever loved? How deeply he could love, and how self-denying his affection would be! But most women would fear him, I fancy—no, perhaps only weak women like me." Then she sighed, and was silent, and presently rose, put her little room in order, and went up to bed.

Major Egan came often to Hampstead, walking and talking with the boys, in whom he took the greatest interest, learning their

dispositions and thoughts, and associating himself with their pursuits and plans. They learned to love the grave, severe, gentle-hearted man, who never omitted words of praise or censure when he thought they were needed, and who found a keen and unalloyed pleasure in watching their growth in mind and body.

But with the mother it was different. She took every possible pretext to escape ; she was shy and uneasy in his company, and when left alone with him, would sit silent and blushing. Sometimes he would read aloud to her, to avoid causing her the pain of supposing she was observed, and he always left all talk of business until then, so that she might have as little unoccupied time with him as possible. He had redoubled his considerate kindness to her, but that seemed to give her more than ordinary pain, and he at last desisted, leaving to go or come, speak or be silent, as she pleased. But he felt for her greatly, and

often took himself to task, fearing that the fault of her waywardness was in his own bad management.

Many weeks had gone by, and Major Egan had arranged all matters of business sufficiently for the mother and children to go and live in a town not far from London, where there was a good school. He had hired a small house for them, into which they were to remove after Easter. Both the boys were in a state of high delight at the thought of a house and bit of garden of their own, companions, and school. The mother expressed her thanks with tears in her eyes, those tears which do not fall, but return back to the heart, and leave a burning trace there.

Major Egan thought her looking ill and worn, and hoped the change would do her good; but she was so depressed, that he forbore to make any remark.

“Mother,” said Feergus thoughtfully, “would you rather not have gone to the new house?—we are so glad about it, that

perhaps we forgot to ask you enough. It could be altered now, could it not, Uncle James, if mother wishes?"

"No, my boy, not now. Besides, your mother is quite content. Are you not, Lucy? You must satisfy this fellow, I see."

"More than content," she said slowly. "It could not be altered now, Feargus, nor do I wish it; and I am glad that you are happy."

"And are you never to be happy, mother? I have never seen you happy. I should like you to be so. Sometimes I have thought if James and I grew up to be men, and you were proud of us, as you were of our father, you might be. Will you never be happy?"

Then the pent heart burst into an exceeding bitter cry.

"Never, Feargus, never! There is no happiness in this world for me." And she left them.

The Major stayed late that evening, and she came down to him before the boys went to bed; she was calm and cold, but he thought her also looking extremely ill. He detained her when they were gone, and laying his hand on her shoulder, and looking earnestly at her, he asked,

“Lucy, what is troubling you?—is there more wrong than I know of—or do I trouble you? Do you dislike me?”

“Oh, no! you are too good, too kind. I am so unworthy. Your very goodness crushes me. Peter wept when the Lord turned and looked on him. I have thought lately what a look of unutterable love that must have been—love from an immeasurable height. Your consideration of me has taught me this; do not fancy that one look or tone of yours has been lost on me. I am so sick and faint at heart!”

“I fear you are not very well in health, but this change of scene and occupation may benefit you. Try, Lucy, to think of the

boys first, and let yourself go with all your faults and errors; and also don't always think your mind is sick; the body is in fault often, and preys upon the mind. Take care of your health. You talk of my kindness, and my distance from you; what is God's distance from everyone of us?"

"To bind up the broken-hearted, and to speak peace," she said musingly. "If such as I dare utter such a wish, may God bless you!" She stopped and kissed the hand that still lay on her shoulder.

When they went to the new abode at B——, Major Egan accompanied them, and remained a few days, for he wanted to be assured that they were all settled and content, and to see the boys after their first school lessons.

Mrs. Tanner was grieved to lose her lodgers, for she had found out that Mrs. Egan was "quite the lady," and she was almost foolishly fond of the boys, to whom she made wonderful presents of cakes and

sweets, as if no place but Hampstead could produce such things. She presented them with sundry books, and all the china ornaments that had pleased them when they first came; finally she gave them the canary, and would take no refusal of this precious gift. Whether she could have borne to part with the tortoiseshell cat, even to those beloved boys, is doubtful; but she went so far as to tell them that, if she gave them that sagacious animal, she feared it would cause them trouble by returning to her, she having read accounts of cats that had performed such a feat.

The boys were not unhappy at leaving Hampstead; this man who stood to them in the place of father thought it best; they were ready to take their stand by him, and adopt their tone from him, as all young, simple and enthusiastic natures are, if only the leader be honest and true, and come up to their ideal. They were quite ready to be pleased with the

new home and new companions; they speedily found a thousand charms and advantages in the new objects by which they were surrounded. They were dutiful and considerate to their mother, but they worshipped their uncle, and to win his approval, to deserve his smile, was the first end and aim of their lives. He was more to them already than their father had been, except in name, for he had been away from home with the Federal army, and when he returned his health was broken.

The Easter holidays were over, school work had been begun a week, the small house was in order, the little servant installed amongst the plates and dishes, the canary was singing in the drawing-room window, and Mrs. Egan had betaken herself to the making of bread, and a beefsteak pie for her boys' supper. As the Major sat quietly reading the morning paper, waiting the conclusion of her task, he felt amply repaid for any trouble he had taken, and hoped the

best for this household that looked to him as its prop and stay.

Mrs. Egan walked down to the station with him in the afternoon, and thanked him earnestly. He observed that she walked with lighter step and more erect head than usual, with a faint smile about her lips, the first he had ever seen; but he also remarked that she was more fragile and delicate-looking than he had thought. After he had left her he was so convinced of this delicate look, and feared so much that it had increased since she had been in England, that he sat down, as soon as he went into his club to dinner, and wrote to her, begging her to take care of her health for her boys' sake, and for his sake also.

When she read that note, and came to this last expression of feeling, she burst into a long fit of weeping.

"O God!" she sobbed, "have mercy on me! I have had so much love and kindness in my life, and have not deserved it."

Her sons came in and found her weeping,
and cried out,

“Mother, mother ! are you more unhappy
than ever ? Oh ! mother, do let us comfort
you. Let us try to comfort you ! ”

She took them to her heart, and said with
a faint, wintry smile, like sunshine struggling
through mist,

“ You do comfort me, and I am not utterly
unhappy.”

CHAPTER XVI.

EASTER was past, and the cold winds that so often accompany it had blown themselves out. Primroses were to be found in sheltered nooks, and wood-sorrel and anemones were opening their delicate petals. The larches in the Avoncourt woods had put on their bright green dress, and the scent of the rising sap and resin was pleasant and balsamic. Vera had a letter one morning from Miss Norreys, saying that she and her brother were to return in a few days. Sir Bertram was already in London. Vera carried the letter into the woods, to read it again; it breathed for her, as they did, the sweet message of the Spring. It was written in haste, and though expressed

affectionately, it gave no details, nothing but the assurance of their return ; with that return all sorts of things were possible. She wandered far into the woods, in spite of damp and muddy places that caused her difficulties, and forced her to take hazardous leaps, or to clamber up newly-trimmed and thorny banks ; but she filled her hands, as usual, with wild-flowers. She heard the low murmurs of the wood-pigeons, and the bold, clear song of the thrush. She had a pleasant chat with one of the keepers, and with a little girl struggling along the slippery paths with a can of milk. She stood by the spot where poor Beau had been killed in the Autumn, and thought of the words spoken that day, the memory of which mingled in tuneful harmony with the sights and sounds about her. Miss Norreys said nothing, but that she and Sir Bertram would return ; but that did not necessarily mean that Beltran would come. Perhaps not quite at first, but by-

and-by; she felt sure of it. The sweet sights and sounds about her were promising for him. She laid her hand on the stone she had meant to hurl upon the lurcher—it had not been moved all through the Winter from where he put it down. It looked so large and heavy now, she doubted very much if she could move it. She smiled as she thought that, were there another Beau to defend, she might find the needful strength again.

Happy and bright from her quick pleasant walk, with glowing cheeks, she turned out of the woods into the high-road, for the fields were almost impassable, and pursued her way home, in spite of a heavy shower. Presently she met Mr. White, the steward of Avoncourt, driving his wife back from the town. They stopped, and offered to take Vera home, but she declined, and said, laughing,

“I never get wet, thank you. I believe I am weather-proof.”

"Sir Bertram is coming home immediately?" said Mr. White, interrogatively.

"Yes, I believe so. I heard from Miss Norreys this morning. I am so glad she is coming back."

"I am sure you must be. You have seen so much of her. I often think how dull you must be, Miss Harrison, with no sister, no companion," said Mr. White.

"I dull!" cried Vera. "I have too much to do; and papa is too companionable for me ever to be dull. I am a little bit lonely sometimes in Winter; but then my life has always been the same. But I love Miss Norreys."

"I hardly know whether that girl is handsome," said Mrs. White, when they had driven on. "I suppose you gentlemen think so, because she is so eager, so enthusiastic; and then her face lights up, and she is brilliant. I wonder if there is any truth in the report that Sir Bertram returns here for her sake. You don't say anything, my dear.

Have you really no idea on the subject?"

"What am I to answer, Jane? I do not *know*—I *think* it possible. I never speak of Sir Bertram, as you are aware, if I can help it. He is a strange man, has done strange things, and may do stranger ones; and he is a man ill to meddle with. If I were you, I would give no ear to reports about him; and, above all, never repeat them."

"You are a very cautious man, I think. I was going to say you were afraid of Sir Bertram; but you might be angry with me for that; and of course you have nothing to be afraid of."

"Hardly," said Mr. White, coolly, and bending down, as if to observe closely the action of his horse's legs. "Afraid is not the right word to use to a good sportsman carrying a double-barrelled gun; but cautious may be. And I do not in the least mind your considering me so, and copying me."

Vera met her father just before she

entered the town; he stopped, and took her into the carriage with him, away into the country, where he had an appointment for a long drive. He too began to speak of the return of the family to Avoncourt, congratulating his daughter upon it, because he knew of the great affection existing between her and Miss Norreys; and in his heart he sometimes took himself to task for the silent, solitary life the girl lived with him.

“I am very glad they are coming back soon, for your sake, darling!” he said. “I know that you are safe with them, I know that they are kind to you, and, without robbing me of you, you are able to see some pleasant society, and that which you yourself prefer, I fancy.”

“Yes, papa; and I am afraid I don’t like everybody. I lay the blame on you, and say you have spoiled me for other people.”

“It is very delightful to a father’s ears

when his children praise him, but I did not mean to spoil you. And when is your friend coming?"

"In two or three days, she says. The beginning of next week, I daresay. Sir Bertram does not like London."

"Then they will be here in time for the County Ball, and I suppose you will want to go? I do not approve of it, but it is very natural, at your age, that you should wish to go, and I know Miss Norreys will bully me into compliance."

"Fancy Miss Norreys bullying you, papa! —with her sad face, her little figure, and her quiet ways! She believes in you too much, besides, to bully you. And don't you ever tell anyone I said so, but I should think—only think—that she has herself been bullied a little in her life by her father, and by her brother. You need not laugh, you know I like Sir Bertram, but I can quite understand a woman being afraid of him, and I do not think he dislikes inspiring a little awe

and fear. Did you know him well years ago, papa?"

"No, not well. Things were told of him not always to his credit, and he and his father quarrelled; but the father was a passionate, violent man, and you know fathers are exhorted not to provoke their children to wrath. You young people can hardly ever fully understand the duties incumbent on a parent, and the anxiety attendant on carrying them out properly; also it is so much easier to say 'Yes' than 'No,' to be weak, and let things take their chance. In my own case, I can safely say I have never been satisfied with myself, and yet I have sincerely tried to do what was right."

"That indeed I know you have, papa. And if making us happy be a proof of your earnest endeavours, we certainly are as happy as most people." Vera was going to have said "as happy as we can be," but in her inmost heart she knew that there were phases of happiness beyond those known to

the gay, thoughtless child, and that though certain of these might be as yet all undreamed of in George's philosophy, they had begun to take for her "a local habitation and a name."

The father did not follow the whole idea of his child, but he did observe that her speech fell almost pointless.

"As happy as most people, Vera! What does that mean? Can you picture further happiness than the comfort, and peace, and leisure of the life you now lead?"

She hesitated, and coloured, for she had hoped he might not mark her mental reservation, and feared to grieve him.

"I do not know that I can, or have ever tried to picture further happiness, papa; but that it may and does exist, I believe. They are not the happiest who have the fewest wants, they are only the most easily satisfied. Am I not right in thinking that the more our mental and moral horizon expands, the more we can conceive of happiness, and that the

conception means also the desire ? We may voluntarily put from us earthly sources of happiness, knowing all the time that they exist, but we place in their stead self-denial, and active charity to others, and call our duties and our very sufferings by the name of happiness. We cannot draw within ourselves, stupid and self-sufficient, without stultifying our whole nature. Is this not so, papa ?”

“Of course it all depends upon what the word happiness really means. You have taken it in its fullest and widest sense, generally it is but vaguely employed. But we have wandered, as usual, into discussion, and we began a very common-place conversation ; and you look as grave——”

“Not a bit graver than you did, papa,” she interrupted, “when you were speaking of your anxieties. Being much with you has made me grave, though I am ‘jolly,’ too, sometimes, as George calls it, and he tells me I ought always to keep in that de-

lightful frame of mind, from which all trouble and care will run off, like rain from a duck's back. I am quoting George; the language is expressive and descriptive. I hardly know how one could improve the simile."

"It has also the advantage," laughed Dr. Harrison, "of being derived, like the Homeric similes, from natural and familiar objects. How different you and George are! If you had been my son, now, Vera, with his advantages——"

"I should not have been as good and kind and cheerful as George is, though perhaps I might have learned a little more. And then how you would have missed me as a daughter! I am sure George could not mend your socks, nor make your tea, half as well as I do."

"That is quite true. No, I never drink tea in any other house as good as yours. Your tea is perfection. I am sure there must be an art in making tea. The Miss

Bells are the only people, except you, who know anything about tea. It is old-fashioned, I suppose—or I am, which comes to much the same thing. Your mother made good tea.”

“Because you liked it,” said Vera, softly.

Within a week Miss Norreys’ pretty bay ponies brought her to the house in the Close. She had not written again to Vera, not being certain from day to day when she should be at Avoncourt ; and so she was not expected, and Vera sat in the dining-room reading aloud to, and asking questions of, the little class of scholars that she always taught at home one day in the week. It was some extra work that she had set herself since the last Autumn, and it had become as great a pleasure to her as it was to the children, who brought their sewing, and generally wore their Sunday frocks, to sit in state in Dr. Harrison’s dining-room, with the pictures on the walls, and the silver mugs and salvers on the sideboard, and the wonderful fire,

and bright steel fender and fire-irons. And Vera read to them occasionally from the Bible, but more often portions of history, biographies, and travels. One hour had stretched to two, and the children looked forward to this "reading lesson," as it was called, with the greatest delight.

The maid knew that Vera was never to be disturbed when thus engaged, and told Miss Norreys her orders; but she persisted that she knew she would be admitted; then hearing whence the voice proceeded, she walked into the dining-room and stood a moment looking on. As Vera rose and came to her, she took her in her arms, and kissed her fondly.

"Let me sit here, Vera, and pray don't disturb the children, or I shall go away. You and I shall have plenty of time to talk for weeks to come. This is a new scheme of yours. I should like to hear all you have to say."

Vera nodded, but she coloured a little,

for she was shy with this, her chief friend, observing her, and she felt her work must be of the very best for her. And so it was; she gave all her mind and energy to the reading and explanation of the book on which she was engaged, and many a little head was raised, and the eyes riveted on the speaker, many a hand at the same time dropping the needle.

“Darling!” said Miss Norreys, caressing the girl, when the children were gone, “what an excellent idea of yours! It is delightful to sit and listen to you. How much you know, Vera, and how well you explain to these small minds!”

“Don’t praise me. I was lonely in the Winter, and turned over in my mind what I could do, and then I thought of this. Let us go into the drawing-room, and tell me about yourself, and what you have been doing in London. You look pale, I fancy. Avoncourt is better for you than London is. I went into the woods last week; they are

getting quite green, and the rides were dirty and slippery."

"And you have not asked a word of Bertram. He is coming here for me presently. He went into the High Street and Market-place for two or three things. The house-keeper says you have not been over once."

"No, not now I know you; when you are away, I cannot bear to see the place sad and empty. When I did not know you, its sadness seemed to find an echo in my heart; but it was a vague, dreamy sadness, with no bitterness in it. Now it would mean lost joy, that most dreadful of trials."

"You love Avoncourt, then?"

"It is very odd, but I always did, long before I ever heard of you. Here is Sir Bertram coming, and you have not yet satisfied my desire to know if he is well and glad to have returned, so I shall have to be contented with coming to my own conclusions, after personal observation."

As Sir Bertram entered the room, he

heard the bright young voice that had left its echo in his heart six months ago, and his colour heightened as he took the girl's hand and greeted her. She stood calm and collected, and looked up into his face with her brown eyes full of unfeigned pleasure.

Miss Norreys watched them both. Her brother was indeed looking well. The black velvet coat he always wore in the country, and the grey wide-awake hat, suited his dark skin and hair, and he seemed most unquestionably happy to return. His dark eyes shone, and his sensitive mouth, with the full, curved lips, answered to the happy mood of the moment. He was talking eagerly of many things he had seen and done, which he knew would amuse or interest this girl; he was asking of her occupations and amusements, whom she had seen, what she had read and sung. He opened a book and a magazine here and there upon the table, and made rapid and acute remarks about them. He came upon

two little sketches of Vera's, of his own woods—one taken in the Winter, under her uncle's supervision, the other in the previous Summer; and so much did they please him that he begged for both in such graceful fashion that she could not but give them.

“And how is George? I met your father just now. On the whole, he is looking pretty well, though he tells me he had a rheumatic attack in the Winter. And have you another dog instead of Beau? Poor Beau! How fortunate that Beltran was in the woods that day! He told me all about it.”

Vera looked up quickly, wondering, but there was no covert meaning in Sir Bertram's words.

“No, I have not replaced him yet. I have not seen another dog that I really like. George has promised to find me one when he comes home in Summer.”

“Oh! I was going to ask if I might do so; but, of course, George has the prior right.”

"Of course," said Vera, simply.

"By-the-by, I asked Dr. Harrison if you were going to honour the ball with your presence. He said yes; but it does not altogether please him—he has not reconciled himself to a young lady's fancies and requirements."

"If papa did not really wish it, I would not go. Balls are pleasant enough, and I like dancing; but there are pleasanter amusements. If I could always choose my company, I would rather walk on a fine breezy day. But that is not often a young lady's good-fortune; and people remark upon walking companions, when they have not a word to say about one's partner in a ball-room."

"And will you go with Julia and me? Do."

"Thanks, if I go, I shall go with my father. You do not mind, do you, Miss Norreys?"

"Certainly not. But when will you come

out to see me? Come soon, dear, for we shall have some people staying in the house the week of the ball, and I like to have you all to myself. The conservatories are so beautiful, with roses and geraniums; and I want you to see two pictures Bertram has brought from Italy, and some other pretty things."

"I quite forgot; I have a little case in my pocket for you, if you will accept it, Miss Harrison."

Vera opened the case, and found a lovely bracelet of cameos in pietra dura, of fine workmanship, and in settings of twisted gold thread.

"It is too beautiful, and too kind of you," she said, blushing.

CHAPTER XVII.

“SHE is simply charming, Julia, and I am so glad you like her. The girl moves like a queen, and smiles like a saint. I think she is improved in these six months. I have never seen a woman besides that was worthy to sit in my mother’s place, or to wear her jewels on breast and brow.”

“Oh, Bertram!” sighed Miss Norreys, “you are so bent on this project—you have so deeply set your heart on this girl—that it makes me afraid for you. I fully acknowledge that I share your feelings as to her worthiness, but I do not feel sure that she loves you; and then I dread your sufferings.”

“Well, you have always warned me,

Julia, so I cannot blame you ; but I cannot feel afraid for myself. The future looks bright for me, and I only long now for the day when I may lead that woman across the threshold of Avoncourt as its mistress. You look grave, and think I am deceiving myself."

"Did you never have fancies like this before?" she asked, in a low voice. "You loved another woman once, and not a little, for you sacrificed much for her."

"Yes ; I loved her with the passionate, headstrong love of a young man. She was very lovely, and I thought her and myself ill-used, and, as you say, I sacrificed something." He paused, frowning, and was long silent under crowding memories. "Perhaps that sacrifice is the only reason why I still remember her, for assuredly the love is dead. But I had one love only for my youth, instead of sighing after a dozen of beauties, and that one love left so distinct a trace that, by heaven ! one might have

supposed I should have been cured for ever of the fierce passion. Now, in my age, I find this blossom so fair, to which no hand has yet been stretched to pluck it from its shelter. I think I prize it the more from the entire contrast between it and my early passion in its surroundings and its own nature. I little knew, when I came back here fuming on business, what a fairy gift was lying in my way. Before you joined me, I hated the whole place, and dreaded actually to walk over the estate; it felt to me as if I were everywhere treading on graves—graves, too, of my foes."

He ceased speaking as they drove up to the stone staircase on their return from the city. In the evening he was silent, but the expression of his face was calmer, gentler, than his sister remembered ever to have seen it, and most fervently she hoped that her foreboding was wrong, for she knew Vera's influence had been for good; her brother exercised far greater self-control

than had been his wont, and was more considerate and attentive to others.

She had once feared, some years ago, that he was lost to her, to himself, and to every good influence—that he had chosen evil rather than good ; but whatever might be the ultimate end of his present venture, she could no longer doubt his rehabilitation. The very goodness and nobility of the girl that had won him would make him ever respect her, and himself through her.

Vera Harrison spent a portion of most days in the company of her great friend, during the time that elapsed before the county ball. There were so many things to say and do, each seemed dearer to the other for their separation, and the long afternoons and soft air of Spring were a bond of union. They drove, and read, and played together, and Sir Bertram was often their companion ; sometimes but for half-an-hour when he came to fetch his sister from the Close, but on that short half-hour he counted through the

whole of the day. He waited yet to tell Vera the ardent hopes he had rested upon her, he dallied with the happy time in which, though he did not utter his love, he hoped his every look and word expressed his full and perfect affection. She was deeply touched by his untiring kindness, and her manner to him was cordial, playful, and unconstrained.

Once in speaking of the guests expected at Avoncourt, Miss Norreys said,

“Only two are coming, I fancy, after all. Beltran of course, but then his room is always ready for him.”

“Indeed !” said Vera, “is he in England then ? Does he live, or rather did he always live abroad with Sir Bertram ?”

“For many years he did ; latterly he had so prayed my brother to add to his other kindnesses by getting him regular occupation, that he spoke to some of the Italian ministers with whom he was acquainted, and got him a secretary’s post. Beltran is a good linguist,

He was in England last year, you know, on business at the Embassy, and he is over now. He has only been in England a few days; I fancy Beltran said that he wanted to get an exchange of duty, and so remain in this country, at least for a time; and Bertram, who is fond of him, would like it, I think."

"He is coming down here, then?"

"Yes, Bertram thought he would like to go to the ball."

At last Vera had learned what she most desired to know. She did not take much account of her own behaviour, but Brand remarked to her what the other servants had mentioned before, how gay she was. Cook, indeed, a north-country woman, thought Miss Vera "a bit fey." Vera laughed, and said it was Spring, and that Summer was coming; nature was gay, and so was she.

Dr. Harrison gave his consent to his daughter's going to the ball; and Brand, who expected her young lady would be difficult

to please—for she could be whimsical and exacting sometimes—was agreeably surprised to find that, on the contrary, she was perfectly satisfied. She only made one stipulation ; everything must be new, and white. Brand and the dressmaker had it all their own way, and all that Vera did for herself in the matter was to write to each of her cousins, Marian in Brighton, and Isabel, who happened to be in London, to send her a riband of the Italian tricolour, with which to tie her fan, with the injunction not to mind whatever it might cost, she wanted it. And she got it ; it seemed a queer fancy, but young ladies have such a one now and then.

On the morning of the ball, as Vera and her father sat at breakfast, the letters and papers were brought in ; amongst others there was a letter from George. The doctor read his letters of business first, and then turned to his son's.

“What a hand the fellow writes !” he began, half laughing and half frowning ;

then he read on, looking more and more intently at the lines, till, tossing the letter across to Vera, he said angrily, "What does that mean? He says, 'I am very glad to hear that Vera has taken up with such a swell' (I hate slang!). 'Avoncourt is a jolly place. The Grevilles say that they hear from their people at Salisbury that Sir Bertram Norreys has come home to marry Vera this Summer. Give her my best wishes.' What does it mean?"

"Nothing, papa, that I know of," said Vera, with a quiet voice, though she coloured high. "It is some idle talk, I suppose. Are you annoyed at it? I hope not."

"I am annoyed. I do not want Sir Bertram to think my child was angling for him. Has he ever said a word to you?"

"No, never. I must, too, speak for myself. I never even tried to please him—certainly not to catch him. It never crossed my mind."

"But you must have done something

foolish, Vera, to give rise to reports like this."

"Why should it be I? Pray put such thoughts out of your mind. I do not deserve them, nor will I admit I am to blame."

"You always are so stiff-necked, Vera," growled the doctor. "You had better not go to this ball to-night. You have been too much at Avoncourt. It is my fault, of course."

"Dear papa, pray let things be as they are; let us do just the same as usual. I am only sorry that you are annoyed and worried. I assure you I am not to blame." She was hanging on his shoulder. How could he but trust the sweet, pleading face that had been the comfort of his life. "But tell me one thing," she went on, blushing as she spoke, "if Sir Bertram Norreys asked me to be his wife, what should I say to him?"

"Poor little thing!—as heart-whole as that? How can I answer you? I don't dislike the man—if you like him. You must

know your own mind. What should you say?"

"I should say 'No.' And don't go and fret about this all day, papa; it could not be helped. You do trust me?"

"Undoubtedly!"

The doctor was not pleased. His pride was hurt at the affairs of his family—especially of his daughter—becoming subject of gossip. But he tried to think Vera was right, and that it would be the wisest course to take no heed of idle talk. He came home late to dinner, and when Vera went to dress he fell asleep, so that she had to awake him when she came downstairs, and wait till he had gone through the same ceremonial.

The servants came in to admire their young mistress, for she had never before worn such radiant attire, and they were duly impressed with the splendour of her appearance. Cook put the finishing touch to the various exclamations of wonder and delight;

by repeating sententiously the Highland saying, "She's better than she's bonny!"

Vera was silent and subdued, and rather pale; but her heart beat fitfully now and then, and she felt very much as if this night were the turning-point of her life. As she mounted the stair, and entered the ball-room on her father's arm, they both heard certain whispered comments from the company.

"What a lovely dress Miss Harrison is wearing! Did you ever see such flowers? Of course they are from Avoncourt! Sir Bertram Norreys has not danced yet! Oh! but he sees her; he has waited for her coming; he will dance with her! See, he is coming this way. I am not surprised he likes her!"

Dr. Harrison winced a little, but Vera looked up quietly and courageously into his face, as though to tell him she was mistress of the situation.

Yes, Sir Bertram came towards her, and asked her for the next dance. She laid her

hand upon his arm to cross the room, and, as she passed, greeted gently, and without any excitement in her look or voice, the persons she knew, and then took her place at the top of the room, unconscious of the eyes that, from beside Miss Norreys' chair, watched her through the figures of the quadrille, with loving pride and admiration that was not exceeded by Sir Bertram's. The folds of her white tulle dress fell like soft, misty clouds about her, and were looped on either side by Japanese lilies, with a broad green leaf, while in the coils of her brown hair she wore a lily and a bud.

"Vera Harrison has extremely good taste, when she takes the trouble to dress herself; though she is always neat and clean, I must say, but as plain as a school-girl," was the comment made by some of her acquaintances.

"Do take me to Miss Norreys," Vera said, when the dance was over. "I want to thank her for the lovely flowers."

“ I will take you to Julia with pleasure ; but you must thank me for the flowers—I believe I cut them all.”

“ How shall I ever be able to thank you both enough for your kindness to me ?” she said, smiling almost like a child.

“ Proud !” said Sir Bertram, bending his tall figure down to her. “ And you would like to make us some return ? I will give you the chance by-and-by.”

Vera found her father sitting by Miss Norreys, and looking, she feared, a little anxious and tired. After saying a few bright words to them both, she saw, standing amongst a knot of gentleman close beside them, Beltran Corsi. He advanced towards her, bowing low, and she offered him her hand. It occupied but an instant, but she saw the depths of his dark lustrous eyes, and then the lids drooped over them.

Two or three gentlemen asked for an introduction to Miss Harrison, and made some

engagements with her. As the band struck up a waltz of Strauss's, Beltran begged her to dance with him; and without another word they were gone and lost in the crowd of waltzers. The tryst was kept, but there was something in the face of each that made the other sad. In a pause of the dance he said, in a low voice, and his eyes dwelt kindly on her,

"I have come back, you see; and I am so glad to see you once more. I have thought of you very often."

"And I too am very pleased to see you," said she, in an unembarrassed voice, and with her usual manner; he felt chilled for a moment, but still his eyes rested upon her, and studied every detail of her face and form. Then suddenly winding his arm about her, he guided her skilfully through the dance, until its conclusion.

"That young friend of yours is handsome," said Dr. Harrison to Miss Norreys. "My boy liked him last year; and Vera,

too, I fancy. He has perhaps the slightest accent ; but I should hardly take him for a foreigner. I wonder sometimes why we English are so prejudiced against foreigners. I own I am."

"Do you see Miss Harrison is dancing with that young Italian who stays with Sir Bertram? I suppose she will dance only with the Avoncourt party all night. She waltzes well. Ah! it is over. Sir Bertram is going up to her with her shawl. I am sure the story is true."

Now Vera happened to hear these comments, and they did not please her. Sir Bertram came to her with her black lace shawl hanging on his arm.

"Let me take you to have some ice," said he, and proceeded to lay the light wrap over her shoulders.

"Thank you very much," she answered, with her gentlest voice and smile. "I was just thinking I wanted my shawl. I will not trouble you to escort me, though, for I

am going into the tea-room with Signor Corsi."

It had cost her some pains to utter this speech, and her brave heart beat rapidly; but she had made up her mind that she would take the first opportunity to prevent Sir Bertram from misunderstanding her. Beltran stood beside his partner, with her bouquet in his hand; a slight flush had crossed his cheek, but his eyes were on the ground. Sir Bertram shot one glance of anger, almost of hatred, at the young man, coloured deeply, and frowned. Had there been the slightest look of triumph in the other's face, the clenched hand would have surely struck him. As it was, Sir Bertram looked again at the girl's kind, open brow and lips, and *did* misunderstand her, thinking this was the mere caprice of a spoiled child. He controlled himself by a great effort, smiled—though his sensitive nostrils quivered—bowed, and withdrew.

"He was very angry with me," she said, when she and Beltran had entered the gallery. "I did not mean to vex him; but—" She gave a little fluttering laugh, and shook out her soft, cloudy garments like an escaped bird. "Why are you so grave?" she said. "Have I done anything dreadful?"

"I know him so well—he is an ill man to trifle with. And—but I have no right to be here, or talking to you. I made you a promise in Autumn—a rash or ill-considered one, and I have kept it. If I could make you know—if I could say——"

"What?—what can you not say to me? There ought to be nothing you think of me that you cannot say. Did you not promise that we should be friends? I have deserved no lack of courtesy from you. I do not know what may be the feeling with your countrywomen, but as an Englishwoman I claim the courtesy which I have not forfeited, and I am not afraid to hear the strictures of anyone."

She reared her proud head, and looked at him steadfastly.

“Before I went away, I knew that his affections were set on you. How worthily he had chosen ! Last night he told me he hoped ere long to call you wife. I knew all this, and yet—I cannot speak to you. But see, you have now angered him, and by a preference shown to me. It might have been that, in the midst of your abundance, you would have thought of me sometimes, and cast to me at least the crumbs of your favour ; but he forgives rarely, forgets never. I should now be banished from your presence. I did not expect much—a word, a smile sometimes—to know that you were happy. I thought I might have been a man not undeserving of your notice. All I was, and did, should have gone to swell your joy, your triumph. I have no right to say all this. I may be guilty of impertinence. Forgive me. I have seen you again, I have approached cool and sparkling waters, I

have looked into their depths, and I have fallen headlong—I am lost! I shall go back to Italy, and perhaps I may be fortunate enough to help her with sword or pen. I will try, at least ; and here, in your fair home, with trees, and river, and flowers, you may sometimes hear my name spoken, and remember me.”

Her face had varied in expression as his words rose and fell.

“One moment,” she said, with low, faltering tones, timidly laying one finger on his arm, and only half looking at his excited face—“I shall never be Sir Bertram’s wife. And to you I shall keep my promise—I am your friend.”

He pressed the hand that touched him to his heart and lips.

“My friend! Kind Heaven, make me worthy, I who am nothing!” he murmured.

“Sir Bertram Norreys told you that! I have one or two engagements to keep—indeed, I have to dance with him again.

Had I not better do so? This is not the place for expressing one's annoyance; and a dance means nothing."

"Or so much," interrupted Beltran.

"Take me to papa. I must do all my duty. But I am tired. Can you believe it?—tired! I shall see you when I leave."

The third dance was Sir Bertram's, who had outwardly, at least, recovered his composure. For the fourth she was engaged to Captain Greville, the very man from whom George's schoolfellows had heard the report of her engagement to Sir Bertram. He now asked, in the most courteous manner, if he might be allowed to congratulate her. She could not, though provoked, feel that he was in the least impertinent in manner or thought.

"Congratulate me on what?—at being at this charming ball? Papa could hardly be prevailed on to let me come," she said, and waited his answer firmly.

"I am delighted, of course, that you came

to-night ; but I meant to congratulate you on your approaching marriage with——”

“ Captain Greville,” she said, with dignity, “ I am neither engaged to be married, nor has anyone ever thought of asking me as yet.”

The gentleman bowed ; there was no more to be said. He danced well, and so they finished the galop. Then she announced her intention of returning home, and proceeded to seek her father. Dr. Harrison was in the supper-room, some one told her, and there she went with Captain Greville, and waited patiently until he was ready.

Beltran had not lost sight of her, and understanding what she was intending, as soon as he saw her leave the ball-room he went in quest of her cloak, and ordered the carriage. Then he returned to her, put on her cloak, took charge of bouquet and fan, and walked beside her—she leaning on her father’s arm—through the hall. Dr. Harri-

son got into the carriage first, and Beltran held one of Vera's hands in his, having restored her bouquet and fan, from the latter of which he had drawn the ribbon, and twisted it on his arm, she smiling at the theft, when, as he said "Good night, but I shall see you again," he was taken roughly by the shoulder, and Sir Bertram, who had also seen Vera's disappearance, and had hurried after her, whispered hoarsely,

"You here! Stand aside!" And, in soft accents, to Vera, "I am so glad to see you, only this instant. I did not know you were going. Shall I see you to-morrow?"

"I was tired," said Vera, "and so is papa. Good night, Sir Bertram. Good night, Signor Corsi!"

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CHAPTER XVIII.

THE carriage drove away, and Sir Bertram turned, with rage flaming in his eyes, towards the young man who stood beside him, and fixed an iron grasp upon him. In another moment he would have struck him, but Beltran stood unflinching, and said, in a low voice,

“For God’s sake think what you are doing! I am no longer a boy, and at your mercy. I am fierce, too, and can strike. This time I should defend myself!”

With a faint cry, and a muttered word, Sir Bertram loosed his hold, and, without hesitating, he called to the driver of a hackney carriage, and bade him drive him over to Avoncourt.

Beltran walked slowly back into the ball-room, saying to Miss Norreys that her brother was indisposed, and that the carriage was ready to take her and her party home when she pleased.

No one could have told that he had been so seriously discomposed, he was perfectly cool and quiet, but in his heart he was cogitating many things.

Arrived at the house, Carlo told Miss Norreys that Sir Bertram had retired for the night, and she and her guests proceeded to their rooms. Beltran walked into the library, on pretence of seeking his cigar-case, but he knew his patron's habits too well not to be sure that he was in far too wrathful a mood either to sleep or to leave unspoken all the fulness of his anger. In the library, buried in a deep arm-chair, from which he rose as the young man entered, was Sir Bertram.

"How dare you enter my presence without being summoned?" he began, with

flashing eyes, and a voice low and hoarse with suppressed anger. "You were, I suppose, with my sister on entering the hall, and heard the message I left with Carlo for her? She and her guests acted upon it, but you——"

"But I knew you better. Had I gone to my room you would have probably sent for me, and then reproached me with insolence. Sir, my patron, it is time I knew by what right you tyrannize over me, though I am no longer your dependent?"

"Minion, do you dare to beard me? Do not ask too much—you may have answers that will confound you. I have a question to ask. What fiend tempted you to cross me twice to-night? Knowing what you know, how dared you come between me and—and that lady? What have you said to Miss Harrison?"

"I would not answer you but for the wrong to her. I have said no word at any time

that you might not have heard. I was with her, because she bade me be there."

"You would not answer but for—— Slave and beggar! fed at my hearth, nourished by my bounty! As a child, as a boy, you learned that I could be furious and unforgiving. As a man you almost felt it to-night. I could have murdered you!"

"I know it; and knowing it, I must know also why. Love grown into hate slays. Fear slays. Now a man, I stand here and ask why. No more will I submit to you—never more will I study your fancies and humours. I am nothing, have nothing—a beggar, but no slave. The hand that cherished me I will never bite, but neither will I touch it more. I must go into the world and fight my way; and I will, it is wide enough; you and I need never meet. You will be in your luxurious home, with your fair wife—if you can win her. I—no, not a beggar—for I will not starve nor beg, but a toiler. We need never

meet. But still I ask, why am I hated? I am but the child of poor Italian parents; my mother was your servant, was she not? and you pleased to rear me, because you fancied me. I was pretty, I amused you—my father, who was he?”

White with passion, and having utterly lost his self-control, Sir Bertram made a step forward, laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, and said with a smile full of bitter irony, and in a voice of intense scorn,

“Learn, then. You are *my* son, and your mother was——”

Beltran gave a low shuddering cry, and staggered forward to the mantelpiece, against which he leaned with his head supported on his arms.

Sir Bertram laughed, and left the room; the misery was nothing new to him, he had known it, and grown half accustomed to its burden; now, too, the secret was told, relief had come to him. But Beltran was crushed under its weight. Over and over again came

the words, "You are my son, and your mother ——" His mother? Was not Agatha Corsi his mother? The woman who had nursed him, tended him till he was six or seven years old, and had then left him with "the padrone" to go "home," as she said. He would question Carlo; he would return to Italy and find Agatha, and she should tell him. Vera's riband was still twisted round his arm; his eye fell on it, he kissed it passionately. It was useless to trifle with himself, to say he was her friend; he could wish her well, and was not worthy, nor intending to win her love; but he loved her for all that. To-night, her shy words that she would never be Sir Bertram's wife, her choice of his escort, the very colours of her riband, had almost encouraged him to think that it was possible he might some day be nearer and dearer to her. But now all this wild dream was dispelled. Fortune, position, he might have won for her; but how dared he even approach his "vision of delight," he, a worse

than nameless man? The bitter scorn in his father's voice had pierced him to the heart. Weary and exhausted with excitement and emotion, he sank into an easy chair, and was found by the housemaids an hour or two later, fast asleep, in his evening dress, his dark hair ruffled about his head and face, and one hand with Vera's riband thrust into his breast. Their entrance disturbed him; he drew out the concealed hand, and throwing it over his head, murmured, "Are you afraid, darling? I will take care of you." He was dreaming of Vera.

Tender-hearted Anne laid her finger on her lip.

"Hush!" she said, "don't let us wake him. See how tired he is, and dreaming of one of his partners. I'll be bound he has got her riband round his wrist."

By-and-by, when Carlo came downstairs, he, not being at all sentimentally disposed towards the young man, awoke him rudely; and Beltran betook himself to his own

room, where he prepared to meet the troubles of the day.

Sir Bertram, always an early riser, breakfasted alone. A later breakfast than usual had been ordered for Miss Norreys and their guests, who were supposed to be fatigued after the ball. Carlo alone waited upon his master, but he found him pre-occupied and silent. Once he looked up from the paper spread beside him, which he may have read, but of which he certainly did not understand a word, and asked where was Beltran.

Carlo answered discreetly that he had not seen Signor Beltran, but believed he had not yet left his room. Carlo had been used, in former years in Italy, to scenes of violence between the two; but then they ended in the submission of the younger, and some subsequent petting from the elder; but somehow he rather doubted that the quarrel of last night—for, of course, Carlo was quite aware that a quarrel had taken place—was

one which would not be so easily appeased ; and he was not sorry, for he might reap some personal advantage, or thought he might, from young Beltran's disgrace. He did not know enough of the true situation of affairs. Sir Bertram would have desired more than ever to keep his son near him, and dependent on him, now the secret of his own early life was in his keeping.

"Let me know when Signor Beltran is stirring. I have business this afternoon, and would see him when he comes down."

Carlo bowed in the affirmative, but determined he would do nothing of the sort ; and so, when, just before luncheon, Miss Norreys walked into the library, and found her brother immersed in work of various kinds, she inquired if he had seen Beltran that morning, for he had not appeared, and she had just heard from one of the gardeners that he had been observed walking across the park. Sir Bertram said nothing, but an angry glitter was in his eyes, and a frown

gathered on his brow. He did go into the dining-room just to greet his visitors, and to say good-bye to those who were leaving that day; then, with his most courteous manner, he asked to be kindly excused for a few hours, during which he would devolve upon his sister his duties of host, and he hoped she would entertain them. He went up to his dressing-room, and after standing for a moment before his wardrobe, he turned to the glass.

“The sooner I propose to her the better now,” he thought. “I do not know about Beltran. I have an instinctive dread that, if he has not already tried to engage her affections, he will do so. She must be my wife, and not his. I have the prior right; he must return to Italy. My wife!—how little she understands how proud I am of her, and how her life shall be one long Summer day! Shall I change my dress? I think not. It will make no difference to her; she is too noble to give one thought

to the outside show of a man. Were she a vain little minx, like those horrid London girls, I suppose she would like me to go over in the phaeton, with bran-new clothes on, and a diamond ring on my finger. God forbid I should get such a wife, though ! I should murder her in a year. Vera Harrison is quite another woman. Vera Harrison, will you love me ? The doctor must know my views, I think." He looked once more at himself in the glass. "Too grey ! Better late than never, though ; and oh ! I hope a better fate than my last."

He took a fresh handkerchief, and a pair of lavender gloves, and as he went through the conservatory, he pulled a white rose, and put it in his coat—the velvet coat he usually wore—and took the shortest way across the park to Salisbury. He turned at the park gates, and looked back at his beautiful home, so still in the sunshine, the great trees putting on their verdure, and casting blue grey shadows over the

thick grass, jewelled with buttercups. The birds were singing their clearest, gladdest songs, and the swans glided upon the blue bosom of the river, spreading their white plumage to the sun. His beautiful home he went now to offer to her—the home he had so neglected, had so avoided from hatred, and which now he loved for her sake. She had said she always had loved Avoncourt—that was for its own sake—would she now love it for his? Sir Bertram's had not been a prayerful life—his own wish and will had, for the most part, guided him; for the last six-and-twenty years he had set his own pleasure before him as his aim, and taken his own means to arrive at it; now suddenly the feeling of which prayer is the expression came into his heart, if the words, "God grant it," did not escape him.

CHAPTER XIX.

"SIR BERTRAM NORREYS is in the drawing-room, Miss Harrison," announced the parlour-maid to Vera, sitting in the study, copying professional notes of her father's for the press.

"Did he ask for me, or for papa? Did you say papa was out?"

"For you, miss. I did not say anything about master."

Vera finished the line upon which she was engaged, and then went to the drawing-room. For a minute she stopped at the door, to recover her self-possession, for she guessed the errand of her visitor to-day. For a minute the thought of, and wish for, her mother crossed her mind, as she looked

up the broad, low stairs, with their twisted balustrade of dark oak, and remembered suddenly the day she had come down them alone, for the first time in her life, when, as now, she wished for support and guidance. Then she entered the room. He was standing, with his hat in his hand, waiting for her, his eyes fixed upon the door, in the attitude of an expectant dog. As she came in, a smile broke over his face, and he looked positively handsome. The years that had passed over him had even added to his beauty. The dark hair, that was turning grey, suited the sternness of his features, and his thoughtful, intellectual brow. Usually, however, the stern face wore a look of gloom, and the lines of the mouth were harsh, from the fierce will and imperious temper. Now the sweet smile, called up by the desired presence, lighted the whole face, and obliterated every evil trace.

“It is very kind of you to come and ask

after me and papa," Vera said, giving Sir Bertram her hand. "I am very well, I did not over-dance myself at all; but papa caught cold. He complains of rheumatism to-day. I hope he will not be ill—I always feel afraid now of that when he does anything unusual."

"I am sure I hope he will not also. There are few people I so respect and love as your father. I do not know if he has an equally good opinion of me—I would hope so, because I want to ask a favour at his hands." Then he paused, and looked earnestly at the fair, intelligent brow from which the brown hair was brushed, and gathered in shining coils about her head; the clear, kind eyes, and the cheek bright with health, over which now a faint blush of surprise, and almost fear, was gathering. "Do you think it possible, Vera, that he would spare you to me, for I want you to be my wife?" he went on.

She coloured deeply, and yet she looked

him bravely in the face when she answered,

“I wish I had known how to avoid this. It is not papa you will have to ask, because I—do not—wish to be your wife. Do not be angry with me—I cannot! I believe I care for you very much. I think you know that, don’t you? But I have always thought of you as papa’s friend, not mine.”

“Ah! yes, that was one thing I feared—my age is against me,” he said, mournfully. “You are not a woman to ask twice, Vera,” he added, slowly, after a moment’s pause. “You would, I think, know your own mind once and for all. I do not consider I have much to set before you as an inducement to you to become my wife, but I can offer you a beautiful home that you have always liked, I can give you all things that are needful, many that would embellish your life, a kind and most loving sister, and my own heart—that is yours utterly, and yours alone! A younger man might have personal attractions which I have not, but at least you

will give a man of my age the credit of knowing his own wishes. You are my wish. You are the one thing I desire. You are my goal and aim, my chosen—the one woman who could sit in my mother's place, and rule in my home.”

His voice rose and fell in low, sad cadence, but at the last few words he lifted his head with an air of pride, and looked steadfastly at her. Seeing her silent and embarrassed, he approached her, and took her hand.

“Not a word, Vera? Have you not one kind word for me? I love you deeply and sincerely, and will love you ever. Come what may, answer what you may, I shall never love any woman but yourself. Lift your eyes, and let me see what they say—my queen, my sweet, my only love——”

“Don't, pray don't!” cried Vera. “I do not desire so much affection, and I am so sorry. I do not know what to say—it seems so ungracious, so—I am not of sufficient worth or account to make my accept-

ance or refusal of so much value by keeping you waiting for my answer. I must not say 'Yes,' for—I do not love you. Do not be annoyed with me—take it but as the answer of a foolish, wayward child; but still it must be my answer."

Her voice sank lower and lower, but she still left her hand in his, and they stood silent; the tears were gathering in her eyes, and the frown upon his brow.

"You doom me to a very sad and solitary life," he said, at last. "I am not speaking now to induce you to alter your decision, but only uttering the thoughts of my heart to the one woman for whom I cared enough to tell them. Sad and solitary, I do not know that I shall dare to stay here in England. I had ventured to hope and plan some bright future, in which you and I might have been together, and helped each other at Avoncourt. I cared for you from the first instant I saw you. I studied you, to be sure of my own feelings. I might have asked

you long ago, but I once made a terrible mistake in my life, that nearly wrecked me—I would not risk another. I had dared to hope that you might be the angel of healing in my home, to descend on the waters, and purify all my life. Darling, I have tried to be a better man since I knew you. I have tried to keep down my wild temper, which has been my worst foe; for your sake the fierce Norreys would have tamed himself, and made your will his. I love you, Vera, let me tell it you yet once; it is sweet to speak your name, to hold your hand in mine, to see the tears hanging in your eyelashes—for me. I am not your slave, but a true man, asking in deepest affection and honour, and waiting in humility for the love of the one woman in the world whose sympathy he covets and implores. In vain—I see it is in vain. My God! Can you think, child, what it will be to me to lose you—to lose my hope? What shall I do?—where go? I do not know that I can

remain here. I will try, because—— Why talk thus of my plans and views?—what are they to you? And, indeed, why should they be anything——”

“They are much,” she said, softly interrupting him. “I wish you could understand how deeply I feel your regard for me, and how truly and affectionately I care for you.”

Tears hung still in her eyes, and a sweet smile was on her lips. More than ordinary was her attraction for him; he was realizing acutely all he should lose in her—the friendship of her fine intellect, the affection of her warm woman’s heart.

“I will try not to be selfish—I will try to content myself with your friendship—at least, I will hide away all bitter thoughts; but be you kind and good to me, Vera; do not deprive me of the sweet privilege I have now so long enjoyed of being with you; do not avoid me; though you refuse to be my wife, do not leave me desolate. I

have nothing now to do but to grow old."

The pathos in his voice, usually so firm and strong, and full of command, the softness and quenched light of the usually fierce eagle eyes, touched her inexpressibly. She bowed her head slightly over the hands that held hers so closely, murmuring,

"I am so sorry—I wish I could have helped it!"

"Good-bye now," he said, "and God bless you! I do not want to grieve you. Will you, though—would you mind—may I—will you let me kiss you, Vera?"

Tenderly as a father might have kissed a long-absent child, he drew her a little nearer to him; he kissed her brows and eyes, and then setting her free, left her without another word.

As long as the spell of her presence was upon him, he was comparatively calm and self-possessed; but the glare and noise of the street without brought him down from the somewhat exalted tone of his feelings,

and awaking to the sublunary world, he awoke, also, to the full sense of his loss and disappointment, and gradually began to consider himself injured and aggrieved. One or two people whom he knew bowed to him as he passed, not venturing to accost him with his present moody face, on which the gloom gathered as he met one after another. What right had they to be there, ready to look upon his pain?—why should they address him? They were nothing to him—nothing—shadows. He pulled his hat lower on his brows, which were darkening with the gloomy thoughts in which he was indulging.

Somehow he was nearing home—he hardly knew how; he avoided the woods and fields, too sad to meet the face of nature, and yet so morose that he dreaded to meet the face of man. He went by the high-road, and turned in at his own park-gates. There he struck across the grass, intending to cross a rustic bridge, near which

was a bench beside the river, in a secluded spot. He thought to rest there, and recover his composure before entering the house. Upon the bridge he stood one moment, and looked at the fair home he had just offered to a fairer mistress. His eye flashed, his nostril quivered with pain, and he turned suddenly into the river path, where, slowly pacing alone, heedless of everything, was Beltran, his hands crossed behind his back, and his eyes bent upon the ground.

Hearing the approaching footsteps, hasty and irregular, Beltran turned round, and the two men were in a moment face to face. Nearly of the same height, and above the average, there was a marked resemblance in their features, complexion, and general appearance, but at the same time some curious differences. The elder man, whose hair was beginning to turn grey, wore moustaches, whiskers, and beard, the younger only the moustache, of the same dark chestnut as his hair. The eyes of the elder were of hazel, with long

black lashes ; those of the younger were dark and soft, like brown velvet, and the lashes matched his hair ; but the great difference between them lay in the expression both of face and figure. The self-will of the elder man was replaced by self-control in the younger ; the bitter lines about the mouth of one, by the firm-set, but slightly curled lips of the other ; the fiery eyes of passion by those telling of a heart and mind in deep repose. As they now faced each other, the same thought entered the mind of both, and was uttered in the words, " My father ! " " My son ! " Beltran was suddenly aware that nature herself confirmed the truth of the statement made to him last night by Sir Bertram, for he recognised his own likeness in the man before him.

He bent his head, and made as though he would pass on from the river-path, and not intrude upon the other. But Sir Bertram—through whose mind many conflicting thoughts had passed in an instant or two of

time, writing themselves legibly on his face, if any seer had been there to read the signs—held out his hand, and said,

“I wanted to see you this morning, Beltran, and sent for you, but you were gone out. You were not tired, then, with your dancing?”

“No, I thank you,” was the cold answer.

“And where have you been now? Were you going home?”

“I have been to the Uplands Farm; and I know not where I was going. I have no home, as far as I know.”

“At the Uplands!” cried Sir Bertram, with a frown. “What is your attraction at the Uplands? I do not see any advantage for you in making acquaintances at my farms.”

“Your farms are safe enough from me. I went up because the place pleased me, and the walk is lonely.”

Once more the young man bent his head, and prepared to pass by, but Sir Bertram

was not inclined to let him go—more especially in so cool and defiant a mood. He had just lost a cherished hope, and he would not now part with his dependent, one so long favoured. Besides, Beltran's manner irritated him; and he asked himself the question, what was he doing at the Uplands?

"You are cool—I had almost said insolent, Beltran. Is it usual even for a guest to wander over the place at which he is staying, guided by his own fancy, and not considering his host's wishes? You are not only a guest—you stand in a nearer position—more is required of you."

"Ah! yes. I do not precisely see why."

"Have I not brought you up, cared for you, placed you well?—are you not indebted to me for——"

"I confess I am at a loss to know for what. You gave me existence—I do not see that it is so desirable a gift." And once more he would have passed on, and left Sir Bertram alone; but he was again detained,

his father laying his hand upon his arm, but remaining silent for some time, cogitating how he should best gain his purpose of reducing the deeply-offended young man to something like obedience. He thought now of angry menaces, and now of cajoleries. At last he said, gravely, with the intention of calling out any latent kindness and sympathy that by long years and habit might have grown up in Beltran's mind, that personal regard which often outlives wrong and selfishness,

"I have been in Salisbury. I told you of fondly-entertained hopes of mine. She has refused me. It is a hard disappointment. Have you not a word of consolation or kindness for me? Do you not regret my pain? Are you not sorry?"

Beltran lifted up the proud young head that had been slightly bent before, half in shame, half in moodiness, and his eyes looked full into Sir Bertram's.

"No," he laughed, "I am not sorry.

You wish to know my reason—you look surprised. What the future may be, I know not; what her heart may say, I know not, but I love her. I am not sorry. Fool, dreamer, madman, what you will, but I love her, and have nothing more to say.”

He spread out his arms with a gesture of *abandon*, and Sir Bertram, with a contraction of the shoulders, uttered a sort of gasping sigh, and covered his face with his hands.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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